

入江君人

KIMIHITO IRIE

神さまの

いない

日曜日

KAMISAMANO
INAI
NICHYOURI



ファンタジア文庫

Novel Illustrations

入江君人
●おのえきあひと

第二回ファンタジア本賞「神さまのいない日曜日」でデビュー。住んでるところ、手帳、好きな食べ物、かに、好きな季節、楽しいときは夏、楽しいときは冬、なので今は夏が好き、そんなこと言うくらいに神さまのいない日を新しく思ったりもする。なんにも聞かないで出した、想像力溢れる日や。

イラスト 美乃
カバーデザイン 神楽直



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入江君人
神さまのいない日曜日

F 入江君人

ファンタジア文庫



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神さまのいない日曜日

十五年前、神様は世界を捨てた。人は生まれず死者は死なない、絶望に彩られた世界で死者に安らぎを与える唯一の存在「墓守」。「今日のお仕事、終わり!」

アイは墓守だ。今日もせっせと怪しい墓を回っている。村へ帰れば楽しい村人に囲まれて楽しい一日が暮れていく。だけどその日は何か違った。銀色の髪、紅玉の瞳、凄まじい美貌の、人食い玩具と名乗る少年……。その日、アイは、運命に出会った。

「私は墓守です。私が、世界を終わらせません!」

世界の終わりを守る少女と、死者を狩り続ける少年。終わる世界の中で、ちっぽけな奇跡を持っていた……。大賞受賞作登場!!



ファンタジア文庫
入江君人作品集
神さまのいない日曜日

神様は月曜日に世界を作り

〈墓守〉——それは最後の奇跡

日曜日に世界を捨てた

神さまの
いない
日曜日
KAMIDAMANO
INAI
NICHYYOUBI



「あなたを一人にはしません。」

いまならどんな人だって許せそうな気がした
何だって赦れそうな気がした
——それこそ世界だって

それは墓守の役目ですから



「不老不死の化け物さ」

「ただいま、**糞**生者ども。**俺**は**人食い玩具**」

カンプニーハシバート

Prologue

On Monday, God created the world.

On Tuesday, God distinguished the order and chaos.

On Wednesday, God honed the numerical values.

On Thursday, God allowed the Time to flow.

On Friday, God overlooked every corner of the world.

On Saturday, God rested.

And so, on Sunday, God—

The land was basically created to be a graveyard.

What once used to be a rich and fertile hill was now completely barren, boulders scattered everywhere. The fossil-like rubble cackled when the dry air blew upon them, and the deforested hills laid bare, with nobody living there.

It was likely to take a hundred years to revert it back to its original state. The land was that desolate.

A group of dead remained there in slumber for a long time. That place was truly a naturally formed graveyard.

And now, in a corner, a little gravekeeper could be seen shovelling hard.

Ai was a gravekeeper, who was twelve years old.

Of course, her job was to manage the graveyard.

With all her might, she kept digging. Putting all her strength into the large shovel, she dug deep into the ground, and used it as a lever to scoop the soil

into a basket.

At the bottom of that knee-deep hole, Ai let out a sigh. She stretched her back, and looked at the sun that was in the west. Her vision sighted the sun that was about to set, and the howling winds were icy.

With a begrudging look, she stared at the setting sun, and after a while, she seemed to have made up her mind as she hopped out from the pit she had just dug. There were many similar pits around her.

Having taken a look at the new pit that had just joined the other pits, Ai let out a haughty snort,

"Job finished!"

She then carried the tools down the hill. There was a shed and a well at the bottom of the hill, where Ai washed her tools. The tools were used for an entire day, and were completely sullied with mud.

Ai held down the handle until it creaked, soaking the tools in the water, and then moved a table and brush over before rolling up her sleeves. She got ready to clean up and washed the tools nice and clean. She removed the dirt and the sediments, dried the tools, and then applied oil upon the necessary parts, making sure the large and small baskets, the scythes and the hoe were glittering under the setting sun.

Then, Ai raised her partner.

The shovel.

It was simple in design, with a silver head attached to a wooden stick, which also had patterns of deformed trees and roots engraved at the head, poignantly proving Ai's identity as a gravekeeper.

And Ai washed the shovel with utmost care.

Various tools starting from the well to the shed were prepared by the villages. To repay their goodwill, Ai was always very appreciative when using the facilities. Finally, she kept the tools inside a shed.

The only thing remaining in her hands was the shovel.

"Then everyone, see you tomorrow."

The door closed with a thud, and the tools reflected the light for the last time.

Once she was done packing, Ai finally noticed her appearance. Her face was covered in dirt. Her hands and nails were completely black. She sighed, took off her boots and shirts, and undid her hair.

It seemed as though there was another sun born under the sunset.

That was how bright her golden hair was.

She washed her hair and skin with just water, and the red light on her hair became golden. Like a gemstone buried in the dirt for tens of thousands of years, the hair glittered once it saw the light of day.

However, Ai was way too casual with how she bathed herself. She showed no less than a tenth of the care that she showed towards her tools. She grumbled about how cold the water was, and ignored the fact that she still had soap bubbles on her as she simply put on her clothes.

The limbs that were as thick as a young tree slipped into the boots and clothes.

She put on the hanging belt that acted like a bandolier, with a hammer and trowel attached.

Then she wore the coat that had a pendant and round jumprings attached to them.

She combed her hair that was once then into a bun, put on a straw hat, and pulled the strap till her chin.

Then, she twirled the shovel around to let the crest face forward, and let it rest upon her shoulder.

Thus, Ai had donned her formal clothing as a gravekeeper.

And so as the sun quickly set in the distant horizon, Ai went home.

†

Today I begin to dig the 47th grave. I hope I will be done by tomorrow.

Ai walked up the hill as she sung a song with an appropriate melody to go along with it. She tapped the shovel on her shoulder, humming away as and

when she wanted to, showing no fear as she hopped down the pitch dark hill path. It was impossible for Ai to fall over. She was so familiar with the place, she even knew what birds lived on which trees.

Soon after, the path ended, and the night sky and village opened up before her eyes. The night sky and village ripped her vision apart, and beyond the far end of the endless fields, there were lights coming out from houses. A lone thin village was hidden in the valleys.

She stopped humming.

Ai solemnly cleared her throat, and checked her clothing thoroughly, one by one. Was her shirt tucked in? Were the buckles of her boots loose? Were there any stains on her?

Finally, she patted herself hard on the head. Then she erased the expression off her face.

A gravekeeper was a guardian of death, an envoy of the dead, a god of death.

Ai always felt that there was a need for a gravekeeper to maintain a stoic look on their face.

Having made up her mind to maintain some dignity just for today, she started walking towards the village.

She straightened her back, lowered her eyes, and had let the iron and leather boots make their marks on the dirt as she walked forward. She then placed her shovel on her shoulder like a musketeer, shoving the crest on the head, and that ensured that she gave off a pressuring vibe despite her little size.

At that moment, an old man in the field suddenly lifted his head up. Ai pretended to glance at him nonchalantly, having caught by the corner of her eye. It was the old blacksmith Yuto. He was always creating tools for everyone.

The moment Yuto spotted her, he vanished into the other side of the fields. Ai wondered that he must have been startled by her dignified presence, and discreetly did a guts pose.

“Hey~ everyone! Ai’s back!!”

Suddenly, Yuto returned, and once he yelled, ten villagers or so showed up

suddenly. Every single one of them were dressed in patched up garments of shirts and pants, straw hats on their heads. They were the males and females, young and old of the village. Most of the villagers were either wounded, some blind, and some even had defects in their limbs. Even those that did not often come by the fields often were out. The farms in Spring were so bustling.

It seemed that everyone was awaiting Ai's return.

Ai curled her lips unhappily, but stopped in her tracks. She then lowered her knees and head slightly, and raised her shovel. In a fluent manner, she recited the words of a gravekeeper,

"Good evening everyone. Today, I shall again pride upon my dignity as a gravekeeper and ensure that everyone has a good life—"

But those words were drowned by the voices of the villagers.

"Why are you so late!? Didn't you promise to return before the sun sets?" "Are you hungry?" "Oh yeah. There are some candies left, eat up!" "Here's some lemonades!"

She couldn't maintain her dignity for even a moment. The villagers patted her head without a thought. An old lady served her candies and an old man tried to continue her words.

In the middle of the flock, Ai sighed.

"I don't want candies or lemonades! I have the food I need to eat at home. Please leave me alone, everyone. Please continue to live your lives!"

Ai insisted on her rights as a gravekeeper. However, the villagers merely nodded it away, unwilling to let go of her.

"Hey!!"

Suddenly, a shout was heard from afar. A young man approached them, waving his hand from the other end of the farm.

It was Yoki.



Once she saw the reliable helper showing up, Ai showed a smile.

“You can’t go about pampering Ai here, everyone! Now now, all of you, don’t gather here. Go home once you’re done with work!”

Everyone else had averted their faces with sheepish looks. After all, the notice board last week had the message “Do not feed the gravekeeper candies.” Only for it to turn out like that. Ai stood proudly by Yoki’s side, glaring at the villagers. The people having noticed her glare escaped, and the remaining ones too were cowed into leaving her sight.

Finally, the two of them were left behind. Ai gave a snort of victory, and lifted her head at Yoki, wanting to share that victory.

“Now then, Ai...no, gravekeeper!”

But Yoki showed the same icy look from the villagers back at Ai.

“Didn’t I tell you not to take the sweets from everyone!! Goodness, you’re a glutton...”

Ai felt that she couldn't pretend not to hear that line. She did voice her objection after all. And so, she lost her temper,

"I beep refill dib tougg happione giv me! Peace dab bad wut uu sad!"

I did refuse the stuff everyone gave me. Please take back what you said. That was the meaning of the words that nobody understood. For some reason, Ai's mouth was stuffed full with sweets.

"..."

Yoki's icy glare was pricking at her.

With the perturbed look of a squirrel, Ai was left momentarily frustrated, and in the exact next instant, she swallowed all the food, excusing herself,

"I can't do anything about this."

"...And those?"

Yoki merely pointed at her hands, seemingly unable to be miffed due to how astonishingly hilarious Ai appeared. There was a cup (third one) of lemonade in her right hand, and her left hand was holding a pile of sweets. The body

remained honest.

And the shovel symbolizing the identity of a gravekeeper remained casually impaled into the ground.

"Seriously! You!"

Yoki placed his hands on his waist, and lashed out. That was the 'Yoki's Thunder' that left every villager intimidated. His lectures were long and boring.

But Ai merely turned a deaf ear to his words. Even at that point, the words entered from the right and exited from the left as she thought about other matters. She stared at the black eyes that were raised nicely in a scowl and the pretty shaped ears.

Ai felt that Yoki's were really pretty, unlike the others. The black hair and eyes were ordinary, but there was a dazzling presence to his appearance as a whole.

"You're pretty, Yoki."

"Huh?"

Yoki, still giving his lecture, was left dumbfounded.

"...Ai, are you listening to me?"

"Yes! I want to be your bride when I grow up, Yoki."

"You aren't listening at all!"

With a look of someone with a migraine, Yoki knelt down and pressed his hand against his eyes and head. Ai realized that she had left his sight, and hurriedly used the opportunity to clear the stuff in her hands.

After she put the final cookie into her mouth, another voice could be heard,

"Hey. You two! What are you doing~"

Turning her head around, Ai found that a woman was walking down the path surrounding the village, headed towards them.

"Ah, it's Anna! I'm back!"

Ai recognized her, and immediately ran over with a beaming look, having completely ignored her dignity as a gravekeeper as she leapt into the latter's

clutches, twirling around as she pulled, laughing away.

It was a dazzling woman. Black hair, black eyes, rich makeup on her gorgeous face, and lots of perfume.

"Nn...!"

"Hm, what's wrong?"

Ai, who was in Anna's clutches, suddenly moved away, and pinched her nose, saying, "Anna, you stink."

Upon hearing that, Anna raised her tender eyebrows, and with a smile on her face, she knocked Ai on the head.

"A~i~? This is called perfume! You know? It's the smell of perfume! You can't say it stinks!"

With tears in her eyes, Ai apologized in a hurry. She was not intimidated by the millions of times Yoki told her off, but one punch from Anna was terrifying enough.

"Well, it is a little too early for you. Adult matters can only be understood when you become one."

Ai too had something to say about that, but she did not voice out for fear of being hit. She nodded her head, wondering.

Why the perfume and makeup? Ai personally preferred the normal smell of a person rather than the compressed fragrance of herbs. She preferred the old-fashioned scent of people when they embraced.

With regards to that, she asked the women in the village many times, but all of them merely smiled and passed it off ambiguously "You'll understand soon." Would that day when she would understand come? Ai could not picture herself thinking of it as a good thing. However...

"I'm back, Anna. You're as pretty as always. Oh, you changed perfumes? Nice smell."

Yoki kissed Anna in a natural manner, praising her perfume scent. Anna in turn showed a delighted look, hugging Yoki's arm.

I see.

Ai widened her green eyes, and learned something new.

"Eh!!"

And so, driven by her immature jealousy, she jumped in between the lovey-dovey couple.

"Hey Ai! You'll ruin the makeup! Hey, what's with you?"

"Hey, Anna! I tell you--"

Ai told Anna of everything that had transpired in the day. How she had started digging the 47th grave, how there was a new owl on the hills, and how everyone gave her sweets.

"And I just talked with Yoki!"

For Ai, being scolded was the equivalent to a conversation.

"Oh, what did you two talk about?"

"I say! Yoki will get married to Ai!"

Yoki immediately spat out air. Anna hissed,

"...Oh my, you already have me Yoki. Even a little child too..."

"N-no! It's a misunderstanding!"

Yoki panicked, and frantically tried to explain. Anna looked back at her husband who was flailing around, and smiled at him, calmly stating, "Just kidding." She then turned to Ai,

"Ai, you can't marry Yoki. He's already married to me."

"Ah, that's right."

"So you understand, don't you? Enough with the foolish words."

"Then how about I get married with you, Anna?"

"...I have no idea what you mean by this?"

"Don't you know, Anna? Other countries do allow people of the same sex to marry..."

"I'm not asking you to show off your knowledge here--well, I guess it. I know you like us, so much that you want to marry us...but there should be better ways to express such a sentiment."

Anna gulped. There was some strange tension that somehow developed between them.

"You and us...well..."

Till this point, Anna paused, and lifted her head to look at her husband who was next to her.

"--Parents and child, I guess?"

"That's not it."

Ai immediately answered,

"My mom's already dead. I was the one who dug her grave. Dad's the Man-Eating Toy Hampnie Hambert. That's what mom said. One day, we will meet."

Ai said those words with a smile on her face, nary showing a negative emotion. The duo watched her with pained looks.

"Ai."

Anna hugged Ai, and the latter was momentarily startled,

"Ai, your mother is Alfa, just her. And so, your dad will find you one day...but they aren't around now, so for the time being...just for the time being, can i be your mother?"

Ai's voice quivered,

"...Anna, you'll be mama?"

Startled, she repeated the words again. 'Mama Anna' those words were like sugar that instantly seeped into her heart.

"Mama Anna!"

She danced with joy, and leaped into Anna's clutches. Then, she realized something, and turned her head around.

"Then Yoki is papa!?"

"Looks that way."

Papa! Mama!

Like a child receiving her presents, Ai kept calling Anna mama and Yoki as papa.

"...Okay, let's go home. I'm hungry."

Hungry! Ai yelled, grabbing Anna with her right hand and Yoki with her left, beaming away in the middle as they went off. There was a little house slightly far away from the village, and that was where they were headed back to.

"Oh yeah, Ai..."

Yoki pointed at Ai's hand, asking,

"Your shovel?"

Her right hand held mama, while her left hand held papa, Ai's hands were holding things precious to her, and she had completely forgotten the symbol of a gravekeeper.

Chapter 1: For Those Who Love Legends

Part I

On Monday, God created the world.

He created the concepts of the presence and the void, in the place where there was nothing.

On Tuesday, God distinguished the order and chaos.

Defining freedom and restraint, He dictated the directions to take.

On Wednesday, God honed the numerical values.

The refined, intricate work brought about much amazing variety.

On Thursday, God allowed the Time to flow.

Values expanded exponentially, giving birth to the original soup.

On Friday, God overlooked every corner of the world.

After millions of hours passed, He saw that the world had become ideal. God loved that world.

On Saturday, God rested.

Billions of hours of time had passed by in total.

And so, on Sunday, God abandoned the world

15 years ago, God suddenly appeared before humanity, and told them.

"That world is overflowing with people. This world will come to an end. Ahh, I have failed."

Leaving only these words behind, God vanished, and back then, while humans were lavishing hymns on this world of Spring, they were left quaking. Their species existed for less than a hundred million years before they finally met God. However, those first words from Him, were words of farewell.

From that day on, Man could no longer die.

Their hearts ceased to beat, their flesh rotting. The Dead could continue to act.

From that day on, Man could no longer be born.

The flames of the factories had extinguished, and new humans were no longer built.

After God no longer inhabited this world, humans screamed in agony. Millions shrieked to the point of vomiting blood. The Living quickly whittled down in numbers, and then the entire world was filled with the Dead.

And so, the gravekeepers appeared.

These gravekeepers were the final miracles that God had granted for the sake of Man.

Gravekeepers would never age, and never know fatigue. God gave them the most ideal of bodies humans could ever think of, had them build graves, and bury the wandering Dead, their work being ensuring the peace of the Living. At this point, Man could finally rest.

"That is a gravekeeper. To protect the rest of people."

Yoki repeated this bedtime story for the umpteenth time, even adding in at the end--Ai, as one of the gravekeepers, you too have to protect the rest . It was the same old story.

"Ai?"

However, on this night, this story ended here.

This room was filled with treasures.

Just like the tools Ai owned, this room was built by all the villagers. The bed, cabinet, table, and various little things, all embellished like presents, were lined side by side. Everything, whether it was the bear toy, or the new shovel, were laid out in the room.

And in the middle, Ai was giving a blissful snore.

Goodness gracious, Yoki muttered, and closed the book.

"Sleep now, Ai...good work today, as always. Really, thank you."

Laying the blanket upon her, Yoki patted her head, and left the room.

"She's asleep?"

Anna was in the living room behind the door, clearing the cutlery. She had her hair tied up, not wanting it to be in the way. Surprisingly, the home apron suited her.

Dinner was not plentiful, but sumptuous. There were two meat dishes, along with cake as an after meal.

"She fell asleep while I was still narrating. Of course, it's mostly because she's too full...thanks for today."

Yoki placed his hand on his wife's shoulder, consoling her for her good work. Looking at the complicated dishes, it was obvious how much dedication she had. Anna turned her head around worriedly, saying, "Hey Yoki, is this really fine? Is it really a good thing...for me to be a mother...?"

"Of course. Didn't everyone in the village agree?"

Yoki showed a kind smile, patting his wife on the shoulder.

"I want to thank you for agreeing to this. It is a really tough job to be a mother.'

"No, it's my pleasure. I do love you, and it's wonderful to have a child at such an age...right now, I am so happy, it's worrying."

But Anna then showed an uneasy look,

"But is it really happiness...for you two...?"

"What do you mean?"

"Recently, I have been thinking that...you might be happiest being with Ai."

Anna seemed a little out of sorts as she evaded Yoki's hand, leaning by the window side; she pulled the curtains aside, and watched the night outside.

"One day, both of you will hold hands, and leave this village, abandoning all lies...you shall live in another land for another 4, 5 years, and Ai will mature. Surely she will grow into a beautiful lady, and will fall in love with you...this is most natural...and happiest, isn't it?"

"Again with that."

Yoki had his wife turn around, and kissed her.

"This path does not consider the most important thing...the one I love is you, not Ai."

"Y-you're saying this now, but who knows what happens several years down? Also, I'll just get older and older, while Ai will become more beautiful..."

"Anna."

Yoki embraced her firmly, wanting to convey his attitude.

"Anna, trust me. In sickness and in health, I will continue to love you forever, respect you forever, and be thoroughly devoted to you."

He kissed her hand.

"...We will reach the end of our lives. We shall rest together."

This was the world where the dead roamed. Yoki swore not to have them wander around aimlessly after death, and to be buried together.

"...Yes."

After hearing Anna's response, Yoki embraced her firmly again, and the tension within his arms melted away.

"Calmed down already?"

"Yes."

Saying that, Anna gently escaped his clutches, paying no heed to his gentle embrace as she nonchalantly put on her shawl, picked her bag, and prepared to head home.

“Heading back now?”

“Yes. I did intend to spend the night here...but I cannot bring myself to say this.”

Since you told me to believe you, so she implied. Anna gave a feeble smile, one so dazzling that it ached Yoki’s heart, and he added on, “...But just one night, everyone in the village...”

“No can do.”

Anna immediately cut him off.

“How can you set a good example, saying such things here? I’m going.”

Anna firmly held the hand of her husband. She opened the door to the outside.

At that moment, the door to the child’s room opened.

“...Anna...you’re going back?”

Over there was Ai, who was rubbing her sleepy eyes.

“Aha, you woke up?”

Both of them exchanged troubled looks. In the meantime, Ai darted in.

“...Anna, I don’t want you to go back...”

She was acting like a monkey, clinging onto Anna’s belly.

“Wa-wait a minute! Don’t give such a crying face, okay? Aren’t we always like this?”

“But Anna...you’re mama today though...”

It seemed Ai was scared of loneliness, as she was sleepy, and had enjoyed herself for the night.

Left with no choice, Yoki placed his left hand on Ai’s shoulder, saying, “Hey Ai. Anna’s tired now. Don’t you always sleep by yourself anyway?”

“But mom...should be sleeping in the same bed...as me...”

Yoki gave a hard sigh.

“Ai.”

He gave a gruff voice, one he usually would do whenever he was angry. He exerted more strength into his hand.

“Look Ai. What’s the matter? You aren’t the kind of child to be so stubborn, right? Look, don’t be like this...”

“Ai, go sleep now.”

But no matter how they coaxed or reprimanded her, Ai just kept her head down, remaining silent.

This rookie father did not know whether he could beat the child. The mother in turn was stunned, due to shock, and due to the pain in her flank.

“Ai, it hurts! Let go of me, my makeup...”

“Ai, enough of that!”

Yoki lashed out.

He was determined, and grabbed her shoulder, raising his hand up.

At that moment, she widened her green eyes, staring at both the adults.

Her eyes were filled with tears, her expression filled with yearning, pain and bitterness.

What was with that look?

Yoki felt a chill, and was rooted to the spot. He knew something major had just happened, but he was not sure exactly what happened. Never once had such a scenario occurred, and he never saw Ai act like this before. To him, Ai should have been more reasonable, carefree, but always able to figure out what the adults really wanted. She had her own opinions, but was never one to be obstinate over it. Thus, even though she was reprimanded before, she would not be beaten. While she might be troublesome, she was never annoying. Yoki had always assumed she was this kind of child.

But this child was selfishly stating what she wanted, bothering him, pleading

with all her might.

Yoki felt that he had to take immediate action. He knew he should clear out all the debt that was owed till this point.

But in the end, Yoki could not move. All he could do was to clench his fists, and remain rooted.

After a while, time suddenly moved. However, it did not seem to be defrosted, but crashed as it had rotted away.

Ai seemed to have felt dejected, and slowly let go of Anna, the strength sapped from her. Yoki saw that the chance was slipping away, but he could not move at all.

Right when the last glint of light was about to trickle from Ai's eyes, The air began to move.

Anna knelt down, and gently embraced Ai. She had verbally expressed her worry that her clothes would be crumpled, that her makeup would be ruined, but at this point, she did not care, and embraced Ai within her clutches.

Like a real mother.

"Ai."

Anna sounded like a different person as she called her daughter's name. That despair in Ai's heart, which had left Yoki helpless, immediately vanished thereafter.

"Mom can't sleep with you."

Anna patted Ai on the head, and the latter frowned unhappily.

"But I will remain by your side. I will always, always be your mother. Okay?"

"...But."

"You don't believe me now? You're old enough, and yet hard to handle..."

Ai seemed embarrassed by those words, and she blushed as she fidgeted.

Don't move, so Anna told Ai. The former took out a handkerchief, and wiped the tears and snot away. This seemed to embarrass Ai further, as she grabbed the handkerchief and wiped her own face.

“You alright?”

“...I’m alright.”

“Can you sleep alone now?”

“I can.”

“Really? Ah yes, I can have Yoki sleep with you.”

“It’s okay! I’m fine! I’m going to sleep!”

Saying that, Ai hurried back into the room. Anna did not look worried at all as she watched the girl leave.

“...So what’s the situation now?”

Finally, Yoki thought of moving as he twitched his neck. Without looking at the former, Anna said, “...In other words, for that moment, I became her mother.”

“Meaning?”

“Still don’t understand? Such an unreliable father.”

“I’m ashamed.”

“Fufu, it’s fine. You’ll understand one day.”

“Let’s hope so...”

In the end, I couldn’t do anything—this notion left Yoki deeply ashamed.

“Don’t you know, Yoki? Once a family is formed, the father is the last to gain awareness...the one first to realize is always the mother whose belly gets bigger with the baby, and the father is always the last. This is normal, so don’t worry.”

Anna consoled him, and exited the hut with a smile, not showing any uneasiness or delirium.

Yoki was feeling a little forlorn as she left them behind.

Good grief, he shook his head, and began clearing the beer bottles and glasses left on the dining table, only to find some of the glasses heavy. On a closer look, he saw some bubbled beer.

He looked at his own reflection upon the glass, and found his eyes corroded

by intense guilt.

After much hesitation, he decided to finish this drink. He poured the rest out, took one large glass, and swigged it down.

Ai had a mother; Anna and he had a child. Every villager agreed, and it was worth celebrating.

So why did he feel so bitter drinking this beer?

He changed the glass, and drank it again, yet found it hard to gulp. No, it was not an issue on the beer. He was drowning his issues.

He did not feel drunk, and there was no beer. However, Yoki had no intention to open another bottle, and went to his room, intending to sleep, passing by Ai's room.

He was ostensibly attracted by something, as he stood before the door, opened a little crease, and found the little gravekeeper sleeping blissfully.

Seeing her like this, Yoki felt that he was saved, and closed the door.

“Ai...”

He did not say goodnight, instead saying,

“...I'm sorry, really...”

Part II

Ai stabbed the shovel deep into the bottom of the grave, wiping her neck with the towel. The warmth of spring was not to be underestimated, as she was covered with sweat. She took a large gulp of water, and popped some sweets into her mouth. The sweets had no place to rest as it rumbled about in her tongue, and the taste of strawberries immediately spread in her mouth.

Ai loved strawberries. They were sweet.

She then shouted out to pump herself up, picked up the shovel, and turned towards the holes. As she had been working hard all morning, the hole that reached her knees just a moment ago was already at waist level.

One of the corners, the place that Ai was facing, was obviously deeper than the other areas.

(I dug too much as I was thinking too hard.)

Ai nodded, and reflected on her actions, before focusing on digging holes again. Simple manual labor instead left an unnecessary void in the mind.

Why did Yoki apologize to me while I was sleeping?

There were times when Yoki would get drunk like that.

There were times when Ai would read books under the moonlight, in the middle of the night.

There were times when both would happen at once.

The moment she heard the creaking of the door, Ai would immediately stuff the book under the pillow and pretend to sleep. “You asleep yet?” Yoki would ask, and she would snore in response. During such situations, Ai would hush her breath, feeling jittery as she endured such an unnerving stare, worried that Yoki

would say, “stop faking already”, or “Sleep already.” She would hear the creaking on the floor, waiting for him to leave. Yet, at the last moment, he would always say,

He would always say sorry.

This sequence of events had occurred a few times.

“What was that about~?”

Ai muttered to herself as she stuffed the shovel into the dirt.

Yoki did something he had to apologize to me for, and kept apologizing.

This little strangeness kept snowballing. Once Ai had realized this, she could sense something was amiss every time the villagers treated her as a gravekeeper. The villagers would always disturb Ai, preventing her from fulfilling her duties by giving her sweets or handling her chores, like the day before, and be told off by Yoki and her.

Ai started to have such thoughts.

Whenever one discovered something, one would start noticing various clues.

And so, Ai started paying attention, realizing that every single villager was apologizing to her in some sense. They were either giving her sweets, helping her with chores, or patting her head, all of them showing a moment of apologia in their eyes.

The whole village was trying to bluff her.

Ever since she discovered this, Ai could not ask about anything.

Every single villager had agreed to hide something from her. It was likely it all started when her mother died, that every single villager chose to hide this fact from her.

Ai had realized this two years ago, and chose to be ‘fooled’.

She decided to keep on living, while pretending not to know anything.

It was no wonder, for if she did, perhaps she would be poking at a hornet’s nest? This was the only place she could be at. For many years, every villager hoped for her to be like this, and only until the previous day did she finally have

a guardian. However, anything vexing remained as such to her.

She kept thinking intelligently, making the best choices. At the very least, that was what she had thought.

She was a twelve year old gravekeeper.

At twelve years old, it meant that she was no longer ten, no longer a child, a grown up.

What should I do? What am I trying to do?

At this point, Ai did not notice the stares from anyone else, and sank into deep thought. The usual smile on her face was gone without a trace, and had become completely emotionless.

“Arggh.”

She looked over at the place where she stabbed the shovel, and suddenly noticed to her shock that she was just digging the same spot.

She stopped, subconsciously dusting herself, adjusted her straw hat, took a deep breath, and stretched. Having bent over for half a day, her bones cracked as she stretched, so loud it took her by surprise. She was really hoping that she would not be having creaking bones at the age of twelve.

After some stretching, Ai looked over to the hill. A grave was before her, on the mound that had become much lower. This grave was filled.

“...Mama, what should I do?”

In this world where the dead wandered as a matter of fact, the person within the grave spoke no words. She had underwent her burial, and entered eternal slumber. It was Ai, not anyone else, who did the deed.

Suddenly, Ai was unmotivated to do anything. She tossed the shovel aside, and sat by a grave. She looked up, and saw the faint clouds of Spring ease by, and some coagulated clouds dispersing from the others, shrinking in size.

She weakly lowered her gaze, probably because she was staring at something bright for too long, and could only sense that the grave seemed strangely deep and dark.

What was the purpose of digging these graves?

Ai was a gravekeeper. Ever since she was born, she was deemed as one. Ever since her mother passed away five years ago, she became the one person with this role in the village. The job of a gravekeeper was to help handle the burials for the dead, and to console the living. If there were any wandering dead, she would have them return to the grave, grant them graves, and grant peace to the lamenting living.

However, Ai only got to fulfill this job once, and that one time was for her mother's burial. At seven, Ai did not know what was going on, and merely abided by the words of the villagers, swinging the shovel.

She could not vividly remember what had happened, and only sensed that she was abiding a person's beckoning, that wherever she was told to dig, she would swing her shovel there. She really, really could not remember the details.

She had no self-confidence at all.

She firmly believed she was a gravekeeper, but to others, was she really one? She only handled a burial once, and had no instructions to abide by.

Thus, Ai dug 47 graves at such a place.

The graves should only be prepared for those who were really dead. There was no real benefit to digging 47 of them, for in Winter, they would be filled, and in Spring, the seeds of the plants would fall in; sometimes, wild birds would build their nests within. What she should really do was to work hard and study every day, waiting patiently.

However, she could no longer bear with this. Ai knew she was a gravekeeper. Burdened with this task, she had to find something to do. She dug one in Spring, and another in Summer, the digging getting faster as she grew up, and at this point, she could finish one in three days.

The 47th grave would be finished with another one, two digs. Holding her shovel properly. Ai invariably hesitated. Once she was done, what should she do next? Once the graves were done, along with the coffins, what should she do next?

At this point, she had to stop.

Ai looked deep into the grave. Who would be sleeping within?

Yuto or Daigo? Anna or Yoki? Or maybe,

Though she had prepared the graves and the coffins, done with all the preparations, Ai still had no idea what death was.

“Until then...will I really be a proper gravekeeper?”

Until then...again, Ai thought of these.

The passing clouds did not answer her, and the dead remained in slumber.

She wanted to hear from a person. At this thought, the cawing of a crow just so happened to pass by in the sky.

With her mouth agape, Ai looked up at the sky. She felt utterly belittled, stood up to raise the shovel, and stabbed it towards the ground in defeat, venting her frustrations.

†

By noon, the graves were dug. She was finally done.

Ai inspected every single grave, and delicately washed every single tool to spend the time. She did not want to return early just because her work was done.

But no matter how long she dithered, her work was done by the time of her second break, and she decided to leave the graveyard before it was evening. She was feeling downhearted on the way back, for she was uncertain, not knowing what to do for the next day. Even if she did ask the villagers, surely something would obstruct her.

However, her gloom lasted only until she descended the hill and returned to her village. When she noticed her village, an elation rose within her.

There was family waiting for her.

Family! How wonderful it sounds. Ai's cheeks just so happened to relax. She was taken aback when she woke up, for Anna was already at her house before the sun rose, waking her up, making breakfast and lunch for her. Ai believed Anna was making dinner. While the latter was bad at seasoning, surely she

would be elated if Ai was to go help her.

Anna was really acting like a mother. Perhaps she was acting more maternal than Ai's own mother.

As for Yoki...

Ai pondered for a moment. She knew nothing about a father.

—Your father is a man-eating doll (Hampnie Hambert). One day, he will surely visit you.

When her father was discussed, Ai's mother merely said these words. While Ai was not really sure on what it was about, she remembered these words the entire time. However, she was ultimately unsure on what a father should be like.

“Let's go home.”

Ai muttered to herself, smiling away as she hopped forward. Anticipating Anna's dishes, she started humming happily, completely oblivious to her surroundings.

And thus, she did not immediately realize—

“?”

That something was amiss.

There was no one in the village.

She did not spot a single villager on her way back. It was farming time, so why was everyone not at the fields? There was also a strange scent. It was gunpowder. It was way too early to be shooting the insects.

While perplexed, Ai did not realize what it was. How strange, how strange, so she nodded away as she took the shortcut, the little garden-like trail passing through the houses.

“Ah.”

At this moment, she met someone.

With a little thud, she knocked into someone's clutches. Both parties stumbled a few steps back.

Ai had an encounter with fate.

He was a boy, so peerlessly pretty. His hair were silver threads, his eyes were rubies, and his skin was ice. He was diminutive in size, and was a complete albino. His movements however exhibited no weakness, his slender body filled with strength, his eyes giving the immense pressure of a king.

Like Ai, he had lots of tools on him. His shoes, pants, and even his coat were black; it would be more appropriate to call them weapons than clothes.

Other than his clothes, every single tool on him were actual weapons. From whatever that was visible, there were three grenades and a handgun, along with an assault rifle slung over the right shoulder. The heavy-looking coat might contain some other stuff.

Also, his right hand was holding a shotgun.

That gun was pointed right at her.

Ai blankly stared back, and found that the boy had already positioned himself to fight.

It was a pop-action sawed-off shotgun, customized. The gun was originally designated to shoot at wild beasts outdoors, only to be modified later on into a gun that was suitable to killing people on the streets.

He twirled the gun stock like a pen, and slid it back towards his left hand, his right hand on the trigger. He had perfect aim at that moment, right at the forehead in fact.

With a little jolt, the ammunition was loaded. He tightened his elbow, and stared intently. His index finger curled. It appeared he had broken from his concentration, for he thereupon showed a relaxed look.

“Pardon me.”

The muzzle simply moved away, and the boy apologized as though he had just bumped into someone.

Ai too hurriedly lowered her head, muttering a few words.

But, just now, eh?

“Are you a child here?”

Before Ai could say anything, the boy asked. She could only close her opening mouth, and nod.



“Just you alone?”

She affirmed.

“You can’t speak? Or are you stupid?”

“I-I’m not stupid!”

She flusteredly spoke up. The boy was pretty, but rotten in personality.

“Then good. So, who are you?”

The boy’s smile was like a cat, grinning like a cat eyeing a prey before it.

“I’m Ai, the gravekeeper.”

Heh. The boy responded, his red eyes narrowed as he knelt down to the height of Ai’s eyes.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

Is my shirt loose? Or is it my shoelaces?

“You? The gravekeeper of this village?”

The boy asked Ai with a sharp glare.

“...Do you have an issue with that?”

“No, not at all...well, it doesn’t matter. If you really are, all the better. I have some things to ask, can I?”

Ai nodded.

“Question, a search.”

The boy paused. Ai was confused, but she prompted him,

“I’m looking for a person who calls herself Hana, dead or alive.”

Ai simply shook her head. The boy showed a surprised face at that reaction.

“Now for an additional question, I am looking for a woman with the following characteristics. Between thirty to forty, brown hair, black eyes, a nice face, of similar height to me, small breasts, and again, wanted dead or alive.”

The boy’s question consisted of various strange terms.

Ai was unable to comprehend fully, but she started to ponder. The only young

woman in the village was Anna, and she had large breasts. There were no such person in the graves.

So she shook her head.

“...Then, an ambiguous search. Is there anyone who fits these characteristics... dead or alive.”

Ai tried raising a few names, and the boy inquired about them, one by one. The possibilities quickly dwindled to zero.

“...Not here, huh?”

The boy sighed, and stood up, turning away without hesitation.

“P-please wait a moment!”

“Huh?”

Ai called for him without thinking. It might look bad on her if this person was to simply ask and just leave. But once she called for the boy, she did not know what to say.

“What? I’m busy...”

The pretty face contorted into a grouchy look. Ai had a thought, thinking this person was so pretty, that such an expression looked good on him.

I have to say something!

“Yo-you’re pretty!”

She messed up. That was what she really thought.

The boy froze for a moment. Like an actor brilliant at improv, he thanked her politely.

“And?”

“Eh...you, ah yes! Who are you!?”

“Me? Ahh, so I never gave my name? I see...I’m.”

The boy smiled. He resembled a child who was going to bust out a huge joke.

“The man-eating doll (Hampnie Hambert).”

“Understood. Mister Hampnie Hambert.”

“Wait! Don’t believe me now! Who actually uses such a name!?”

The man-eating doll (Hampnie Hambert) retorted.

“Huh? But didn’t you introduce yourself as such...?”

“It was just a little joke! Is there really anyone around you called Hampnie Hambert?”

“Ah, that’s the name of my father.”

Huuuhhh!? Hampnie’s art-like face contorted into a cheap one as he glared at her, before he calmed down,

“...You have parents? What, your father calls himself Hampnie Hambert?”

Yes. Mom told me before she died “Your father is a man-eating doll (Hampnie Hambert). One day, he will surely visit you.””

Hm?

“Maybe...”

He meets the condition! Ai pointed at him.

“Father?”

“Why?”

Hampnie yelled,

“What in the world are you thinking? How did you end up thinking of me as your father?”

Ai sensed her mistake, and tilted her head,

“It is weird. You do look like you’re seventeen or eighteen, Mr Hampnie...”

“...I guess.”

“The father I imagined is a tough guy about 40 years old. In his debut scene, it’ll be strange if he’s not yelling and fighting against something.”

“...I think that’s not the only strange part....”

“Well, it’s a small problem.”

“You’re extrapolating things a little.”

“Papa, papa.”

“Heh? Why you say so?”

Ai was confident as she said this,

“I feel this is fate. It’s my instinct.”

There’s no need to explain further, right? So her eyes stated. Peeved at her expression, Hampnie said,

“...You aren’t planning to have a proper conversation with me at all, are you?”

“Of course not? Papa.”

“Papa...”

Hampnie muttered this term quietly. His red eyes looked back and forth between Ai and the village, pondering about something. Ai had assumed he was going to ask something, and tensed up.

“Well, whatever. Call me however you like.”

Hampnie however merely brushed this aside as he turned away. This time, he was really departing.

“Papa. Where are you going?”

“...”

Of course, Ai followed. Hampnie let out a sigh,

“You said you’re a gravekeeper. Is that real?”

Ai was wondering why he would ask the obvious, and quietly nodded. With a skeptical look, Hampnie sighed, and smirked,

“If you insist, I have a job for you, o’ gravekeeper.”

“What is it?”

“What other job is there for a gravekeeper to do?”

Before he finished, Hampnie was grinning away as he head forth. He dusted the hem of his coat, his slender legs quickly shuffling back and forth, such that

Ai had to run to catch up to him.

They entered the village, and stepped upon the street.

Everyone was dead. Probably. It was the first time she had seen corpses, and in this day and age, it was difficult to determine if someone had died. However, if one was beheaded, it was likely that person was dead.

The street she passed by had completely changed. There were bullet holes on the walls, chickens cawing as they scampered out of the wrecked sheds, and some buildings had collapsed.

Filling this scenery were corpses. All of them were showing heinous looks Ai had never seen before, dying as they wielded guns.

Ai immediately fell to her knees.

“You can bury them.”

Hampnie said.

Those words pricked at the deepest part of Ai’s heart. She was simply seeking something to support herself, forcing herself to think of this.

The dead was to be buried.

That should be the mindset of a gravekeeper.

She had thought it was time for that. The trial to determine her mettle as a gravekeeper had arrived.

When a gravekeeper discovers a corpse, there’s a need to bury. Another thing a gravekeeper has to pay attention to however are the whereabouts of the living. Burying the dead remains important, but the peace of the living is equally so.

Ai thought of what she should say, and intended to repeat herself. She lifted her shovel, getting up despite being weak in the knees. There’s no problem.

She approached the corpse closest to her. Though it was missing the right half of its head, she knew who it was. Just this morning, she had seen the man was

dressed in clothes and shoes. She was also well familiar with the slurred voice when he called her name. Though she knew so much, for a moment, she couldn't remember his name. Old man Yuto seemed so foreign to her.

“...Identify the corpse...identify the time ...”

She did these two things. No problems. Next, she was to check for any living persons.

“Is there anyone—anyone still alive—?”

She called out, but there was no answer. Right, Yuto should be married. What about granny Yuki? At that moment of thought, Ai looked over to another corpse to her side, and found Yuki dead too. Then, she thought of Yuki's friends, and found them dead opposite her. Everyone had died. At that moment, Ai had a feeling that there was no one alive to begin with.

After that, she had to bury them. I can do it.

Ai put the shovel to her side, and lifted the corpse with both hands, forcing back the chills that was rising up her hands.

It's so heavy! The burden on her shoulders were many times more than she had expected, and her knees crumbled. The corpse suddenly crashed into the ground, the rotten eyes looking up.

Under the pull of gravity, the eyeballs rolled towards Ai.

I can't do it. These words slowly seeped into Ai's consciousness, and she hurriedly shook off this notion.

I can do it. I'm a gravekeeper. I'll do it.

She unwittingly panted hard, as though she had made a full sprint. I can do it, definitely.

Ai raised the shovel and stabbed it into the ground. Since she could not move the corpse, she might as well move the grave over to the corpse. Now that's thinking out of the box.

The ground was hard to dig at. She had repeated the same motion thousands of times, yet she was unable to do so as easily as before. But it's fine, she could do it. She's been crying, but she should be able to do it. Her cheeks and tongue

were hot, and she was panting like a dog, but she should do it. Her head was searing away in a fever, and she had difficulty thinking, but it was fine.

Of course! Because I'm a gravekeeper!

Ai took a deep breath in her choking throat, wiped her face with her sleeves, and repeated to herself three times, I can do it. She continued with her job. The grave was no more than 10cm deep. I can do it.

"...Huh?"

Suddenly, she heard a voice.

"...well, isn't this little Ai? What's the matter? Why ye crying?"

Gruff as the voice sounded, it was genial, filled with kindness and concern. It was a voice Ai really wanted to hear, but yet didn't want to.

"Grandpa Yuto ..."

The corpse suddenly got up.

"...Grandpa...erm, your head's wounded ..."

"Ahhh? It's fine. It doesn't hurt."

She knew what was going on. On this world, the dead wouldn't die, and would wander around, even with severe bleeding on the right side of the head.

Ai stared blankly at this terrifying scene before her.

"Oh! It's serious! Some terrifying brat came into the village! And...eh, I can't really remember...that's weird."

Yuto held his head, trying to remember, but his memories were seeping from his cranium, mixed with the sand on the ground.

"...Anyway, it's serious! You have to run away!"

Saying that, he reached his hand out, but Ai instinctively ducked aside.

"Ai, what are you ..."

The brief moment of fingertip touch left her extremely nauseous, and she pried herself from the hand.

"So-sorry."

“...”

Yuto didn't say anything. Ai watched him worriedly, scared that he would be infuriated, but she was wrong. Yuto kept staring at Ai's shovel, along with the little hole next to her feet.

“Ai, why are you digging this hole, ye?”

Ai couldn't answer. Once she lifted her eyes, she found them looking at the hole on Yuto's head.

“Is there something on my face?”

Yuto did not mind as he reached his hand to touch the hole in his head, realizing that whatever that was supposed to be there was gone.

Silence divided the living and the dead.

“...W-what...is this? No, this...”

Yuto forced a smile, reaching his hand out, trying to find a way to excuse himself. Ai's body would not obey her as she shivered. The expression on Yuto's face changed. He was terrified, looking back and forth between her and her shovel, as though she was a real god of death who was going to harken his demise.

Ai wanted to yell, wanting to tell him not to looking at her with that look.

“Don't look at me!”

But the one yelling that was Yuto.

“Stop giving me that look! What's wrong with you? You're treating people as monsters! I'm no different in any way!”

Ai was dumbfounded. She knew that when Yuto viewed her as a death god, she had deemed Yuto a monster.

“N-not at all. This is a misunderstanding..”

She was lying. Even then, she was repulsed.

The vexing, ugly dispute continued. The death god continued to dispute, and the dead kept harping agitatedly.

Argh, this is not okay.

“Ai!”

Yuto reached out to Ai for the third time, and Ai broke away for the third time. But this time, Yuto was being serious, and Ai was grabbed easily by the left hand, tumbling over as a result.

He was holding a six-barreled revolver in his right hand.

Ai thought that he would kill her, for the notion came so naturally to her.

But the gun was immediately pointed elsewhere. Yuto fired off two rounds at the house before him to suppress his enemy, hiding Ai behind him.

“Get down! It’s that brat!”

White hair appeared by the window. It was Hampnie. Yuto fired a shot to prevent Hampnie from approaching, and pulled Ai away from the window, forming a deadlock where neither side could determine each other’s location.

Ai remained prone as she looked up at Yuto, seeing that his face had lost half the agitation it had, instead replaced with that of the adult who always protected her.

“Yo, the guy who hasn’t died cleanly.”

This voice came from the other side of the wall.

From those words, Ai figured out where Hampnie was. The village was so small, the villagers knew the colors of the neighbors’ beds. Ai could hear some dull sounds, and from that, she inferred that he was using a cupboard by the wall as cover.

Yuto naturally had the same feeling, sensing his victory as he licked his lips, reloading in a fluid motion. He slowly advanced, trying to ensure his victory. One step...two steps...and one more step.

However, what was said next ended up crushing all his hopes.

“I’m going to fire off 30 bean-sized lead bullets here. Two seconds later.”

One, the moment that was said, a bullet was loaded. Yuto showed no hesitation as he spun around, leaping upon Ai . Hampnie did not count to two, and did not fire any lead bullets.

“Impressive. Nice attitude, you’ve changed my opinion of you. That’s worthy of respect.”

With a foot on the window sill, Hampnie took aim, not with a shotgun nor an assault rifle, but with a short, thick revolver. It was a hunter’s last resort to hunt a huge beast.

He fired. The magnum bullet blew off the rest of Yuto’s brain. The gun left a little buzzing, and the village finally regained some silence.

Once it was done, Hampnie hopped in through the window.

“Sorry for not finishing the job properly. I did blow off the heads of the others though.”

Ai remained crushed by Yuto , unable to move. She was unscathed, and there was no blood on her clothes. Yuto’s heart had ceased to beat, his blood not dirtying Ai in the slightest.

Ai got up from beneath the heavy corpse.

“...You, killed everyone?”

“I didn’t kill them.”

The swirling emotions in Ai’s mind created a surging vortex.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying. The era of humans killing each other has ended. All I did was to blow their brains off and break their spines. It’s the job of a gravekeeper to kill.”

Shut up.

Ai raised her shovel, and swung it down.

•

Ai had a dream.

She felt it was a weird dream, and got up in a daze, looking around. She

wasn't familiar with the bed and the room, but she immediately realized where it was. It was the only Kiln in the village, the bedroom of old man Daigo.

Why was she asleep in such a place?

Ai saw that she was passed out, was dressed in her usual clothes, her various tools hanging on her. She undid the button on her collar, heaved a sigh, and observed the room carefully.

She couldn't find the shovel.

Naturally, there shouldn't be a shovel in the bedroom, but the absence of the shovel left Ai really uneasy.

She walked out of the room.

There were the vessels and furniture old man Daigo made, neatly laid out in the room, waiting for their master to return. However, Daigo was not present, and the mosquito coil that was usually lit was long gone.

Ai continued outside, and found the sky to be red. For a moment, she thought it was the sunset, but the direction was wrong. It seemed she had slept an entire night. She looked towards dawn, and turned towards the workshop.

She did not encounter anyone. For some reason, she avoided looking down at the village, and did not wonder why the chickens ran away.

She did not see anyone as she went from the house to the workshop, and did not stop to wonder why.

Ai sped up. There were sounds from the workshop, containing the kiln Daigo was so proud of. Ai could find Daigo there, and that surely it was because she was tired from playing at his workshop.

She opened the door.

Hampnie was there.

"Yo."

Hampnie was naturally created the dead. The kiln used for pottery was modified to a furnace used to cremate, and so he stuffed the corpses in this modified kiln, even using her familiar shovel to stuff charcoal into the flames,

only stopping to look at Ai.

“...Ah...”

Ai appeared to have something to say, but she couldn't and merely raised her trembling fingers, pointing at Hampnie. There was no significance to her actions, but her body suddenly tilted over, and she leaned on the door. She hastily grabbed onto it, preventing her body from falling over.

It wasn't a dream.

“Y-you...”

“Me? Didn't I say my name already?”

“That's not it!”

Ai covered her face with her hands, and all she could feel was her head exploding.

“What...is going on?”

“...”

Hampnie did not answer.

“What's going on? Why? Why do this? I...everyone...”

“...”

Lots of doubts came onrushing, but none of them took a tangible form.

“Why did you kill everyone?”

“Why did you leave me alive?”

“Why have you come?”

Hampnie did not answer.

“Daddy!” Hampnie did not answer as he continued with his word. He lit the charcoal tossed into the kiln, saw that the flames covered the kiln, and closed his eyes.

He prayed silently.

Gone was the sneer he just had. He was completely covered in sweat and dirt,

focused on cremating the dead with an earnest look.

Ai leaned at the door, dazed as she watched this. The question she was about to keep asking remained as she stared at Hampnie intently.

Ai felt that he was really acting like a gravekeeper.

Ai felt that he was being too sly for showing such a look despite what he did.

She got up slowly, and snatched her shovel. Though she was stumbling, she shoved a pile of coal into the kiln.

The corpses and the shovel belonged to her. It was her responsibility.

Hampnie watched on, and shrugged, saying, “Calmed down already?”

Ai stopped moving the shovel. She understood very well what he was getting at, “You’re not going to attack me now, right?”

Ai tilted her face. At the end of that nightmare, she raised her shovel, and swung it hard at Hampnie, hacking at his slender neck.

Hampnie merely shifted his face aside, evading the attack.

Ai turned her arm around with complete disbelief, but by then, it was all over. Hampnie managed to dodge and take her down brilliantly.

Right when Ai was about to swing the shovel again, Hampnie’s toes followed the momentum as he kicked at Ai’s chin.

That was all she could remember.

Ai recalled, froze up completely like stone, and after a while, continued with her work.

She was completely confused.

Hampnie did not say anything as he turned his back on her, doing something else.

With the two of them together in the workshop, Ai suddenly realized that she was being with her father.

She felt that something cruelly unreasonable was at work.

The kiln continued to burn through the night, and Hampnie did not rest as he kept cremating the corpses. Ai felt that she could not fall behind, and even as she stumbled with fatigue, she continued to toil. Whenever Hampnie told her to eat, she would say, "You eat, then I'll eat." Whenever he told her to sleep, she would say, "You sleep, then I'll sleep."

Finally, Hampnie left her to her own, and shrivelled in a corner of the room. Ai saw that he was asleep, and finally returned to her bedroom. It was the second night.

The next day, Ai woke up in the middle of the day. She went to the workshop, finding Hampnie continuing to work. She hurried over, only to be told by him,

"Go eat. I'm done eating."

Ai went to the living room he pointed at, and found loads of food there. There was soup boiled from onions and potatoes, fried bacon with baggage, and a loaf of bread.

Ai had no appetite, for she felt like a ghost, yet she had an obligation to finish what was before her. She felt that she could not eat anything, but she forced herself to scoop the soup, and bring it to her mouth.

It was utterly delicious.

The taste of onions seeped into her parched tongue, causing it to ache. It was the best soup she ever had.

She then ate the bread, had a bite of bacon, and drank some water.

Each dish was unbelievably delicious.

So Ai kept eating heaps of food, and drank bowls of soup. She stuffed her face full of bread, and gnawed at the bacon.

After replenishing salt and water, Ai shed new tears, and the numbed sadness started to ache again.

She was left frustrated that she was able to live on, eating and sleeping wildly. She, unable to shed tears as she did not consume anything, felt so different from before.

She had no intentions to eat, but easily regained her appetite due to the

delicious food. That left her in despair.

The despair strangled at her neck, causing her to choke. Then, she finally got to swallow, the strength seeped by her sadness left her more relieved than before.

She thought she should simply die.

She felt that she had more than enough reason to do so.

So she thought as she wept, choking away, engrossed in her own sadness. Deep within her heart, she felt this ending was for the best.

And when Ai finally quiet down, there was no noise to be heard from the living room.

“Waaaaahhh— —!”

Ai suddenly hollered, and lifted her bread. She tore at the bread, bit by bit, and stuffed them into her mouth. She tore at the bacon, bawling away gaudily as she ate in an unsightly manner.

That was what she felt she had to do.

•

Ai walked down the slope leading home, with a pace neither brisk nor slow.

The village was surrounded by hills on three sides, and the entrance was facing the East. There was a gathering spot at this open space, and Ai’s home was a tad higher, furthestmost inward.

The wreckage of the village remained. The birds not ensnared in the traps scavenged for flesh, and the flies flew about in the pools of blood. The corpses were the only ones that vanished.

Most of the dead villagers were cremated. Hampnie knew where they were, and gathered them all. Ai, overly familiar with the dead, identified them, and had them cremated.

There were 45 corpses collected in total.

Ai looked up at the sky, recalled the number of graves she dug, minused

herself off, and found it to be the same as the number of villagers.

There were 47 graves in total.

She scaled the slope, arrived before the familiar corridor, and faced a gust of wind. It was often a relax breeze; apparently, the villagers had chosen this place for her to live in when she was born.

The house looked no different from before, aside from some messy footsteps at the door. Like usual, Ai cleared the dirt off her soles, and reached forth to open the door.

Yoki and Anna should be inside.

Their brains should have been blown apart, just like the others.

That should be the case.

But...

What if that was not the case?

She found herself having thoughts she should not have, but she could not help but imagine. If...if they were not inside, and if they were still alive, holding hands...

She would be utterly elated. That should have been the case.

But...

What if they left her behind?

Ai did not know what she was thinking, and did not know if she was hoping for them to be alive, or for them to die.

She opened the door.

The bell made a cut chime. Ai did not change out of her shoes as she stepped inside. Her feet caused some strange creaking on the wooden floor. There was a rifle to the side of the corridor, one she never saw before. She turned around, and found the door unlocked, along with the stench of blood.

Their corpses were embraced in each other's clutches in the living room. They were shot through the heads, Yoki leaning on the wall, embracing Anna, whose right arm was torn off.

But even amidst this devastation, they looked so tranquil.

Ai snivelled hard as she cried, disgusted at her own thoughts. She hated how she felt relieved seeing them present, sad that she had forgotten about them. She hated herself for feeling sadness. She was despondent to realize she was not as innocent as she thought.

“Uu!”

Ai wiped her tears, and separated the two’s embrace. Yoki’s corpse was all stiff, and she wasted a fair bit of effort.

“Need my help?”

Hampnie said at the door. Ai spun around, not surprised in the least. She had sensed his presence the entire time, but she never expected him to willingly offer help.

“Please disappear.”

Ai said to a dark corner, and the darkness did not seem guilty in the slightest, simply answering, “I know.” The voice vanished soon after, but not before it muttered,

“...And that’s why I hate this.”

Ai did not know if those words were meant for her, or for the sleeping duo. However, Ai did not want to know, so she quietly continued with her work.

Righto, so Ai lifted Anna. There was no perfume to be scented.

Part III

They carried the corpses up the hill. Ai was carrying 20 on her back, while Hampnie behind her was carrying 27. The dead was cremated, kept into little containers, and remained still.

The hills she did not see for three days remained so barren. There were 47 open graves, and it was a majestic sight. Hampnie whistled.

Ai put down the dead, and picked up the first time. She embraced Anna and Yoki within her clutches, and solemnly proceeded forth. She placed Anna into the grave she dug up 2 days ago, hesitated, and placed Yoki into the same grave. While it meant that she had dug an incorrect number of graves, nothing of what she predicted was right to begin with.

The graves were clearly too big, and there were no coffins to be used.

Again, Ai cried. She cried as she buried the villagers, one by one.

Hampnie watched her as he continued to smoke.

Soon after, the sun rose to the top, the cigarette was exhausted, and Hampnie started to yawn.

"The burials are done."

Ai's work was done.

Hampnie widened his eyes slightly, got up, looked towards the graves, and found the ground flattened.

"Hm, not bad."

Ai felt that he had neither the right to praise her or demean her, but she nodded. No one would visit this graveyard again.

Hampnie had a look at a nameplate or two on the ground, took out another cigarette, and lit it without putting it into his mouth.

He stabbed it into the ground, closed his eyes, and prayed. Not a word he said, and not a gesture he made as he remained as still as a statue, praying.

Ai too uttered some prayers.

The smoke kept rising.

Once it dispersed, Hampnie turned around, lighting a cigarette to smoke. Ai walked away wordlessly.

“I’ll be leaving tomorrow.”

Once they descended the hill, Hampnie suddenly noted.

“What do you intend to do in the future?”

These words left Ai confused, and her mouth remained opened for quite a while. It took her a long time to recover, and then, she noticed that there an ‘after’. Her life in the village was about to com over to an end, and after having swept aside the suffocating sense of enclosure, she felt her vision widened greatly.

But after the strong gusts blew aside, what appeared before her was an endless wasteland. Was Ai, alone in the barren world, with no persons nor beacon to guide her.

Only Hampnie was present.

A sense of familiarity anchored deeply within her heart, and she hurriedly shook it off. She had to despise him, and not seek solace within him just because of the soup and bread.

Ai pressed upon her heart, harboring such thoughts.

“If you have no place to go—”

Hampnie trekked down the hill path, and spoke without looking back.

“I can introduce an introductory letter to you..”

“...Introductory letter?”

“Right, get someone to adopt you. I do have lots of connections.”

Ai quickly gave chase, but was stupefied upon hearing that.

“...You’re willing to help?”

“I can’t possibly leave a runt alone in such a place, you know? See, I’m an adult. Don’t worry, even in this age, there are many good men to be found. Get someone to formally adopt you then.”

“But...I’m a gravekeeper, you know?”

“...”

Hampnie remained speechless, and after a long moment of silence, he said, “...You’re no gravekeeper.”

Ai lifted her eyes towards his back, not knowing what he was saying.

“...First off, I was still thinking that damned God can do anything, so He could have created improper gravekeepers, but this isn’t the case.”

“...Daddy?”

“First, a gravekeeper has no parents.”

“No, but I do ...”

“Yep, that’s why you’re not a gravekeeper...”

At this moment, Ai noticed what Hampnie was trying to get at, and what he was hesitant over.

Hampnie was intending to wreck Ai thoroughly.

“Those guys appear like flies. There’s no way they have parents.”

“...B—but everyone said that I am.”

“They all said you’re a gravekeeper? Can you really trust them? Those guys have been lying to you for years.”

Ai gasped. She too knew that everyone was hiding something from her.

“But,daddy...”

“I said I’m not your daddy. Listen, my real name...isn’t the Man-Eating Doll.”

“Eh? But ...”

“Anyway, the Man-Eating Doll is just a fairy tale, a doll that has a spoilt spring

that keeps moving forever. They used to tell the kids, “If you don’t hurry and keep your toys, the Man-Eating Doll will come for you.” Anyway, that’s the name I’m borrowing.”

Saying this, Hampnie seemed really gleeful.

“I don’t know what those villagers are thinking. They got an ordinary runt like you believe that you’re a gravekeeper, and say that you have parents, that your daddy’s the Man-Eating Doll. It’s all nonsense.”

“This ...”

The jigsaws of doubt in Ai’s heart was reassembled by Hampnie, forming an ugly case of chaos.

“What is going on...”

Ai muttered to herself emptily.

“What exactly is going on?”

Nothing made sense to her.

“The truth should be buried in the darkness, or I should say, beneath the graves, right?”

Hampnie sarcastically quipped, and Ai held the shovel firmly, thinking, “You’re the one who wrecked everything, and now you’re saying that?”

There was certainly a ‘catch’ to this village, some vexing, mysterious vibe to it. However, the mysteries should be unravelled slowly, and not pried apart so overbearingly.

Ai had an impulsive, violent urge, grabbing the handle of the shovel firmly.

“Yo.”

Hampnie kept staring at her.

“You want to kill me?”

Ai suddenly lifted her head, thinking, What is he asking. Isn’t it obvious that I want to kill him?

But she couldn’t say it.

Ai slowly lowered her head, her heart unable to conjure any notion for revenge. She might have thought of revenge if she woke up to find Hampnie, but he did truly mourn the dead. The impulsive emotions would not simply vanish, but they were no motive for her to kill. Even till this point, she firmly believed Hampnie was her father. There was no proof, but she believed they were bound spiritually.

Everything and anything was robbed by him, but Ai could not bring herself to hate him. She felt he was too sleazy, and despised herself for being unable to bring herself to hate him.

“If you’re a gravekeeper, you won’t hold any grudges.”

Hampnie said.

“If you’re a gravekeeper, you won’t be beating up the living.”

Hampnie said.

“You’re no gravekeeper. You’re a human.”

The damning conclusion from above left Ai dejected, and she could shed no tears.

Ai was simply hoping that he would not talk any more. Over the years, every single person had called her a gravekeeper, and begged for her to be one. What else was she to do? Never once did he think of the feelings she had while living in the village. After her mother died, she was the only one left, and since they entrusted her with this task, was that not the only path she could choose? The only thing she could do was to be an obedient child, no? Whenever they patted her on her head, gave her snacks, doted on her, she felt they were being kind to her, wanting her to do something in return, or to repay them in some way.

Thus, she lived till this day, finally gaining a family, people who were willing to welcome her without too much of a fuss.

But everything was taken away by the Man-Eating Doll, physically, mentally, the living, the dead, everything was devoured cleanly by him.

And even at this point, the last of her starting to crack apart.

“But even so... I’m still a gravekeeper...”

Ai was greatly rattled, but she clung onto this point as much as she could.

Hampnie stopped talking, and instead, exhaled some smoke, seemingly disgusted by the stench.

“If you want to keep living amongst the people, you have to accept everything.”

Saying that, he walked away. They trekked down the hill path, to the fields. He stopped, narrowed his eyes at the village, and smirked, “Look, Ai, a gravekeeper here...”

The cigarette in his hand was pointed at the person there.

“I’m referring to someone like her.”

A woman was standing in the middle of a village, a shovel resting upon her shoulder.

•

The person was dressed in a common shirt, a common pair of pants, a common pair of shoes, a common face, and a common face. . And a scar.



The woman standing there was the perfect specimen of a healthy woman, but the scar down her right eyebrow to her eyelid did distort the balanced look.

“Yo.”

Without hesitation, Hampnie went forth to talk.

“Now is this a rare encounter. Nice to meet you.”

The woman answered with an earnest smile.

“You’re pretty big. An early generation?”

Hampnie blatantly sized up the woman’s body, looking at her long legs, firm belly, and meaty body. His leer left Ai utterly infuriated.

“Daddy! You’re really rude!”

“You’re the rude one. Gravekeepers shouldn’t be looked of in that matter. Their bodies have no such functions.”

Ai never expected herself to be told off instead, and glared back.

“Hello, the name’s Hampnie.”

Hearing that, the lady suddenly raised her eyebrows, showing a bemused smile.

“Uh oh! Mama! Time to clear up the toys!”

So Hampnie said. Both of them chuckled in unison. It appeared they were making a joke Ai did not understand.

“Yo, Ai, this woman here is a gravekeeper.”

Saying that Hampnie pointed over. Ai widened her eyes. It was the first time she had seen a gravekeeper.

The gravekeepers sent by God, simply put, were ‘perfect humans’. They had a penchant for toil, and fine bodies. They could understand love, would help others, and would always have a smile.

This woman showed a tender smile befitting of a citizen of Heaven, just like the smile Yoki spoke of. Ai suddenly felt inferior, like a new rookie meeting her peers. Tentatively, she greeted, “H-hello! I’m Ai!”

Saying that, Ai let out a long exhale, and looked up.

“...You’re really pretty.”

“I am honored to receive your praise.”

The woman quickly bowed formally.

“Nice to meet you, I have a Scar.”

“Yes! Miss Scar, is it?”

“Hold on a minute, don’t you have any common sense? Who comes up with that name?”

Hampnie tugged at Ai’s hair.

“Hey, scarred one. What do they always call you?”

“The ‘killing demon’.”

Ai gasped.

“What about before then.”

“‘Death god’, ‘inhuman’, ‘scarred one’, ‘Yuri’, ‘Maria’...”

The woman rattled off several names without hesitation, include some incorrigible insults.

“‘Stone head’, ‘death god’, ‘scarred one’, ‘Maria’—”

“Enough. What’s your first name? Did God not give you a name?”

Hampnie smirked.

“No.”

“Interesting. You don’t care?”

“Certainly.”

Hampnie giggled.

“Ai, what do you think, seeing how she doesn’t care? She says she doesn’t care about not having a name. These gravekeepers are all the same.”

Ai looked up blankly at Scar, who was beaming away.

If there was such a perfect person around, that person clearly was not a human. Scar knew about love, humor, angry, and vices, but never followed through with them. Such existences clearly were not human.

Her instincts told her that she was different from that.

If it had been anyone else, like Hampnie, telling her that she was not a gravekeeper, then she could continue to hope. Even then, she could not help that it was not the case. It was over the moment Ai felt that she was not a gravekeeper.

Ai finally accepted that she was not a gravekeeper

“Is there something wrong?”

The woman looked down at her, smiling. The smile of a Holy Mother left Ai thoroughly heartbroken.

“Ahh, don’t mind. She just has an identity misnomer.”

Hampnie continued with nonchalance in his voice. They left Ai alone, conversing away.

“Right, so, do I call you Maria? I guess the name Scar is probably used as an insult for you.”

“No, please do call me Scar.”

Hampnie widened his eyes, conveying his shock.

“Hm, never thought that you will refuse...it seems you’re really malfunctioning.”

“To me, this certainly is important.”

Scar touched the scar that gave her the name. Her body could only be described as perfect, yet the scar appeared to be an existence of calamity.

“Hm, how impressive.”

Hampnie simply praised her scar and name, and Ai too felt the same. Ai felt that both the perfect body curves and the imperfection on the skin. The villagers Ai knew of had already lost their fingers, arms, or senses, covering their scars in shame, which really disappointed Ai.

“Yes, I do feel that it is really...good...”

Ai had difficulty describing things. She felt that despite their losses, they should not be too mindful over it. Ai had somewhat recovered, and found herself fond of this gravekeeper.

“Also, I have something to ask you. Question, I’m looking for someone.”

Hampnie spoke with the same unique manner of speech he said to Ai. Upon hearing that, the expression suddenly vanished from Maria’s face, instead replaced with a robotic look befitting her expression.

“Speak.”

“I’m looking for a person who calls herself Hana, dead or alive.”

“There are 8 cases with matching nicknames.”

Hampnie kept smoking as he raised questions, and like before, he kept narrowing the list down through the name and the characteristics. Ai understood that Hampnie’s unique manner of speech was a standard manner of speech when conversing with gravekeepers.

And like before, he came up empty.

“...Not here.”

Hampnie muttered the same words to himself, and tossed his cigarette aside.

“Nothing else on my side. Sorry to delay you.”

“No worries. Helping the living live a wonderful life is our responsibility to begin with.”

Scar said with the usual courtesy of a gravekeeper, smiling, Ai was a little envious of her, for she was unable to talk so succinctly.

“There ...”

Hampnie pointed at the graveyard.

“Are...47 bodies. Please bury them.”

“We just buried them ...”

Ai was about to say that they were just buried, but Hampnie put his hand with

the cigarette across her.

“Didn’t I say that only the gravekeepers can kill? Those guys aren’t dead. In this age, nobody can die even with hearts that have stopped beating, and blown brains.”

Ai frowned.

“It doesn’t meant that they’re alive though. They’re not dead, and they’re not living. This goes for the Dead as a whole...and that’s why those gravekeepers need to act.”

Hampnie said, pointing at Scar.

“A gravekeeper has to scatter dirt upon the dead using the shovel so that they can pass on. Even if we blow up their brains and cremate them,all we are doing is merely to immobilize them ...”

Ai recalled the strange warmth when she embraced the ashes within her clutches.

“These gravekeepers are either stationary or patrolling. The former will remain at the same spot, managing the Dead, commonly seen in large cities or the bordering villagers. The latter are always wandering, seeking the Dead. This woman here should be the latter, I guess?”

“Yes. But...”

Scar said, somewhat hesitant.

“These gravekeepers really have sharp noses, and can detect the Dead no matter how far they are ...”

“There are no dead people around.”

Scar flatly cut him off.

“Sorry...what?”

“I cannot detect any presence of the Dead from the direction you are point at. Is the location far away?”

“...Impossible. It’s just a hill away. 47 of them. You can’t sense them?”

“There are 50 buried there, but no further reaction beyond them. One of

them has a strange reaction, but that can be ignored. I am a wanderer...with a different purpose myself. I am just simply passing by.”

Hearing that, Hampnie lit up a cigarette, and started to ponder. Ai remained by the side, reflecting over these words.

Only a gravekeeper can bury the Dead, and there were only two who dealt with the Dead. One of them, Hampnie, clearly was not a gravekeeper.

“In other words...”

Ai lifted her sparkling eyes towards Scar.

“I’m a gravekeeper!”

Ai was revived. The weariness within her body was replaced with vigor.

Hampnie looked on with disdain, exhaling all the smoke within his lungs, and questioned the crux.

“So Scar...this brat here is a gravekeeper?”

Hampnie appeared to be completely bamboozled for no purpose. Scar’s reply remained cold.

“Who knows...I have no...”

“You can’t tell?”

“I have no functions to distinguish between humans and gravekeeper, just as how humans cannot distinguish between dogs and wolves.”

“Stop talking with that gravekeeper language. So you mean ‘I can tell’?”

Scar nodded. Hampnie sighed, “You could have said so earlier. This is troublesome...so?”

“She is a gravekeeper. I can tell.”

These words continued to echo within Ai’s heart like a prophecy. Those were the words she wanted to hear.

“You hear that!? I’m a gravekeeper! The real deal!”

“...Hm, seems that way.”

Hampnie did not refute, and quietly nodded. Seeing his attitude ease up, Ai

got cocky, carrying on, "So? How does it feel after being so confident just now?"

"You're right."

Hampnie puffed a large breath of smoke towards her.

"Ack! Ack! What are you doing? Just because the truth's here doesn't mean you can be such a sore loser!"

"Right right right, I get it, I get it."

His attitude left Ai suspicious. Till this point, he had been repeating his point that she was not a gravekeeper, yet he did not appear to be displeased, his eyes filled with some pity.

"Scar."

Hampnie called out, giving a different vibe this time. The change was subtle yet decisive, akin to the hammer of a machine gun being switched on or off.

"I don't know what's going on, but you probably have something to do. Please, do go on."

Neither Ai nor Scar were trying to stop Hampnie from trying to shoo Scar away.

With a smile, Scar bowed politely, and simply left. Ai watched the shovel disappear beyond the village, looking completely confused, and asked, "What now?"

She did not think she was relying on him,

While Hampnie was a cruel mass murderer who would slaughter anyone within his sights, Ai still harboured some trust in him. He answered all her questions, really took care of her, and was willing to find someone to adopt her. While he had such a differing personality from her, he accepted that wholeheartedly.

So Ai never expected herself to be killed.

"You're lucky."

Hampnie nonchalantly tossed aside his cigarette.

"Now you got the proof as a gravekeeper. Looks like she's a veteran. She's

trustworthy.”

Ai took his words literally, and broke into a smile.

“Hehe...”

“Now then, what do you intend to do?”

Hampnie asked.

“Intend...? Intend what?”

“I’m asking, what do you intend to do later.”

Hampnie spelled out every word clearly.

“What do you mean, intend to do? Why are you asking this out of a sudden...”

Right, I’m a gravekeeper. Ai twirled her shovel about, looking at the emblem of branches and twigs. The partner held firmly in her hands, strongly proving her *raison d’être*.

Her limp body was thus filled with enough strength to call herself a gravekeeper.

She felt that her existence was as sturdy as this shovel.

Thus, what she said to Hampnie was basically to pull herself together, “I’m a gravekeeper.”

Hampnie responded, “So?”

Eh?

“So what?”

Ai was perturbed. She kept thinking that she was a gravekeeper...that the fact explained for itself.

“So, I ask, what are you going to do, Miss Gravekeeper? You haven’t answered my question ...”

Hampnie sounded displeased, and that alone left Ai greatly rattled.

“I-in other words, I’m a gravekeeper. I need to bring peace to the Dead, and help the living continue to...”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

Hampnie spoke silently, unloading a bullet trail of words.

“I’m asking where are you going to sleep tomorrow. What are you going to do two days later? What about three days later? A week later? A year later? How are you going to keep living?”

“This...”

She could never imagine anything like that, and the shovel fell from her limp hands. The emblem once protecting Ai could only show its silver back.

Ai instinctively knelt down, trying to pick up the shovel, but Hampnie stepped onto the handle.

“What are you doing!?”

“This thing here is just a shovel.”

He exerted an overwhelming force in his leg through his feet. The shovel should be pretty sturdy, yet it was creaking under his weight. Ai’s strength alone could not budge it aside.

“Please, move!”

“Look, what are you going to do now? What can you do for yourself?”

“Shut up! Let go...”

“So I ask, what do you intend to do? What if there’s someone annoying before you. What are you going to do with him? How are you going to shut him up?”

“!”

Ai clenched her fists as emotionally as she did when she swung the shovel towards his head, and swung one at at his white face, leaping forth like a beast.

And Hampnie delivered a kick to her abdomen from below.

Her slender body was tossed up so hilariously high, and after half a spin, she fell to the ground.

Her emotions exploded.

Her body lost all control.

She was in such pain that she was numb, the inhaled and exhaled air clashing. The muscles she had never used were screaming agony. Her left and right hands were moving in opposite manners, she could not find her bearing, and she could not vomit despite feeling nauseous.

Her gut winced quite a few times. Finally, she vomited, the gastric juices falling along with tears and snot down her her face.

And Hampnie's black boot came flying towards her nose.

Her neck was kicked into another direction, the thick nosebleed stuck deep within her throat.

She got kicked by him.

Followed by another kick.

And another kick.

Another kick.

Another kick.

Another kick.

Another kick.

Soon after, Ai crumpled like the others, closing her eyes and shivering as she kept apologizing for some reason. She had crumbled mentally, her rage long gone.

The soul of this twelve year old really could not withhold a shackling.

Her face, tummy, and limbs were in pain, and it was really terrifying. Her tears blinded her vision, her nosebleed and snot causing her difficulties in breathing. Hampnie, who delivered this pain to her, stood silently by the side, leaving her utterly petrified.

Even in the midst of this beatdown, Ai could not believe that Hampnie was violent towards her.

She felt this betrayal was too much, yet she felt the payback was to be expected.

She felt she never trusted him, but she did.

He killed her family, destroyed the village, and he himself had said that he was untrustworthy, that she should not be with him.

It was basically a sequel to the act when she attacked him with the shovel.

That it should have been the case.

Hampnie kicked Ai hard, probably trying to settle the score.

“You’re a gravekeeper, and whatever this village is, I get everything.”

Hampnie kept kicking Ai like a ragdoll, and stopped once she ceased to move. He knelt down, grabbed her by the collar, smacked her twice, thrice, and pulled her towards himself.

“It might be unbelievable, but you may be a mixblood between a gravekeeper and a human. You’re the kid born to a malfunctioning gravekeeper.”

Even after hearing such shocking words, Ai showed no reaction.

“But these don’t matter.”

Hampnie sneered, and no longer continued to smoke. He said,

“Forget everything. This village, your identity as a gravekeeper, or else you have no way to keep living among the people.”

Ai widened her hollow eyes. Hampnie said with some pity, “You’re too weird, too extraordinary. Your entire existence is full of fallacies, one carrying a shovel. It’s true that I’m a weird one too...but you’re weirder. You haven’t realized this, right? You don’t know that you’re a monster, not human, not a gravekeeper. If you dare to go outside like this...you’ll get beaten to death outside.”

Ai lifted her head hard. Hampnie then continued beating her, trying to rip her neck off.

“There’s violence anywhere. If you forget everything, I won’t hurt you anymore. Forget and live a happy life.”

Saying that, Hampnie spun around, leaving Ai at where she was.

Ai saw through his intentions, and shivered.

She flailed about, exerting strength in her limbs, and got up without a thought. She took a running step forth with her left, steadied herself with her second step. With amazing precision, she she controlled herself in mid-air, gathering all the recoil into her right leg, using it as a spear to kick forth. This flying kick ripped through the air.

However, Hampnie easily parried aside this kick. Given Ai's physique, this kick from behind probably would not have been anticipated, but Hampnie smacked her with the left hand, without looking back, and left her behind.

Ai weakly fell on her back.

"You're too weak."

Hampnie did not budge, his back turned on Ai, saying,

"Feeble creatures are just so pitiful..."

Then, he slowly turned around, looking to the ground, seeking something before he glared, "...Don't you dare!"

With excruciating effort, Ai moved her disobedient body, not wanting Hampnie to snatch a certain something from her.

"This is...m-my precious ...!"

With her quivering hands, she grabbed the dirt-stained shovel. She knew that it, having protected her in the past, was no longer able to do so, yet she wanted to risk her life protecting it "...M-my precious!"

"This thing is just a shovel."

Ai embraced her partner firmly, protecting it from the terrifyingly steely voice.

"You can't continue living without that thing protecting you?"

She looked down, and shook her head.

"Accept the fact. You're human, not a gravekeeper."

She shook her head frantically.

"Forget everything and keep on living."

She shook her head, her tied hair had scattered and slapped upon her face.

Hampnie clicked his tongue.

“Then what are you going to do!?”

“I don’t know!”

Ai lifted her head, roaring,

“You brat!”

“I don’t know! But!”



Before Ai was a pair of blazing eyes. Once she saw the colors in the eyes, she shivered. However, she spoke up, converting the remaining certainties in her heart to words, “I can’t...just forget about this...”

The villagers had been secretly training her, forcibly giving her gifts and love, allowing her to pass these days in ignorance and immaturity.

Thus, she became the gravekeeper of this village, and ended with bloody memories and jigsaws of secrets.

The jigsaw was reformed by Hampnie into an ugly chaos, but Ai ripped the picture aside, reassembling them as fragments, looking closely at the little pictures. Amongst these fragmented pictures was the village only Ai knew of.

She knew people would gently call for her head.

She knew people would reach out to pat her head, knew of the old stench from their bodies, the sight of the village beneath the night hue, the voices of the kind villagers.

She knew the laws of a gravekeeper.

She knew of her acclaimed mission to comfort the Dead, help the Living, and witness the End of Humanity.

That was the Gospel others had imposed on her. However, such an appearance enthralled her, and she yearned to be such a person.

She knew she wanted to forget certain memories.

She knew of destruction, violence, blood and gunpowder. She knew of the growls from those close to her, and knew of the futile cries for the villagers.

The heavy bodies, the dull feet, the stench of human flesh being cremated, the weight of the shovel, the incorrect number of graves.

“I can’t possibly forget.”

Hampnie stopped.

“I can’t just forget everything and play dead to live on.”

Ai lifted her head.

The crestfallen eyes were exposed beneath the scorching sunlight, and she was so terrified, she shrank further. Her eyes would probably be deformed with a kick or two, and Hampnie did devastate her thusly.

But Ai did not falter, and did not escape with the eyes of a loser, and did not fight back. All she did was to hold her ground and stare back at the reality before her that was Hampnie. She neither resisted, nor did she beg for mercy, merely widening her large green eyes in a daze.

“...Seriously, what’s wrong with you?”

Saying that, Hampnie let out a deep sigh.

Of course, Ai’s words remained, “I’m a ...gravekeeper.”

“Really...guess so...you’ve been saying this all the time...whatever, I’ll make you give up.”

“...?”

“I won’t do anything to you. Those whose values of life can’t change will really suffer, but try your best.”

Hampnie nibbled on a cigarette, and turned his back on her, as though proving that he was not lying.

“There’s a first aid kit in the workshop. I’ll apply ointment on you.”

“Huh?”

Ai’s mouth remained white, and she lifted her head towards the back of the head of white hair.

“...What are you trying to do?”

“Who knows?”

Hampnie gave an icy sneer, as though forming a crack on the white wall of ice. Ai dared not to look at his face like before, but she decided to believe his words.

“I may act like this, but I used to be known as a kind uncle back in my hometown, you know.”

“...Whatever. I’ll apply medication on my own. I don’t need your concern.”

“Fine, do as you please, since it’s your life.”

Let’s go, so Hampnie said, and giggled quietly as he walked off. Ai too hurriedly gave chase, and her thoroughly battered body somehow ended up being obedient. There was nothing wrong with her bones and organs.

Ai did not know why she was receiving such treatment. She hated the pain.

“Ah, right.”

This scene ended, and following that was the incisive moment.

The Man-Eating Doll spoke up.

“You said you’re going to continue living as a gravekeeper, right?”

Ai nodded. Seeing that, Hampnie chuckled,

“In that case...”

He grinned, probably having thought of a brilliant idea.

“So are you going to die here as a gravekeeper?”

She was speechless.

“There are all kinds of vices, like violence, desires, killing, decadence, failure, setbacks, hypocrisy and decay. If you are going to keep on living to your desires, these things are going to corrupt you one day. 15 years ago, that might have been a different case, but now that we’re at our end, Humanity will never accept you. You have to beat and kick aside these things for them to accept you. This job causes lots of despair.”

Hampnie’s voice remained gentle.

“The chances of you remaining as yourself until your death is terrifyingly low. Maybe the ‘hopeless light’ within your body will glow brighter than ever after some refinement...but the chances of that light being corrupted is thousands of times more likely, and in the worst despicable manner possible. So ...”

Hampnie spat aside his cigarette.

“So why don’t you just die here?”

The cigarette landed, and the failsafe was pulled aside.

He twirled the slide of his gun like a pen, the piston brought to his left hand, his right hand holding the trigger as he took aim in an instant, right at the head, naturally.

It was a pop-action, sawed off shotgun.

The gun was pointed right before her...

“...You’re joking...right?”

It was the exact same scenario as when she first encountered him, but the mood was different. Fear and confusion seeped out of her heart. Would Hampnie be joking around here? He was serious. He was trustworthy.

Ai finally understood Hampnie’s intention, and guessed the reason for his violence towards her.

Hampnie wanted to help her. He wanted to grant her a life as an ordinary person, and deny her identity as a gravekeeper that would prevent her happiness. For that reason, he was willing to enact violence, and be hated for that.

So, he gave up on this idea, affirming at Ai had some ‘hopeful light that was beyond redemption’.

But since he had decided it was an unattainable dream, Hampnie said,

“Go die along with the light, like the sunset.”

He was willing to kill.

What a barbaric, savage manner of concern it was. How stubborn and convicted he was as he took this path.

She was truly no match for him.

The gun remained still, wide open before her like a tomb, causing Ai to feel that she was being sucked in. It was an unshakeable sign of death.

“...You’re joking, right?”

Ai groaned. She had no vigor to resist, and all she felt was despair.

She showed her green eyes..

“You’re lying, right...daddy.”

She dared not to believe, and worse, did not want to know that Hampnie was willing to kill her.

“You’re joking, right? This is a joke, isn’t it? We were just talking. You aren’t willing to kill me now, right? You saved me ...”

Saying that, she laughed a few times.

Hampnie did not answer, merely gripping the gun, basically signalling that she was showing signs of a fall.

“Can you kill me? Can you, really? Can you kill someone you just talked to, someone you just saved?”

He was going to kill his daughter.

Hampnie did not answer.

“Daddy!”

“I can do it.”

Hampnie finally answered, tired of her pleas. Ai had tried to dismiss it all as a joke, and the smile disappeared from her face completely.

Fear immediately rose up her heart.

“I don’t want to die!”

Ai begged for mercy.

“I don’t want to die!”

Ai kept yelling, not wanting to die. She did all she could to sound pitiful and tragic, hoping that any adult with common sense would hesitate.

But the barrel remained still.

“No, I can’t let you live just because of this reason.”

Hampnie scoffed aside the desperate plea.

“Remember this well. There are two kinds of survival desires. One is to ‘not want to die’, and one is to ‘keep on living’. There’s a world of difference between them. The path you’re going to take isn’t as easily resolved as ‘not wanting to die’. The only words that can let you keep living is ‘I want to live’.

Ai looked dumbfounded as she digested these words.

Do I really want to continue living? Am I really that eager to keep living?

She lost everything.

The one she relied upon and trusted was pointing his gun at her.

Did she want to continue living even after such tragic circumstances?

Ai lowered her head, averting her eyes from gunpoint.

She was acting completely defeated.

Then, a gunshot was heard.

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Ai was taken aback, and lifted her head. She thought she was shot, and then realized that could not have happened. There was no way Hampnie could have missed.

“What the?”

The shirt before her eyes was dyed red.

“Tch, my shirt’s dirty...”

Hampnie was dumbfounded, yet not caring for his own wound, instead worried about his own clothes. He showed no shock on his face, looking unfazed.

“Y-you aren’t hurt?”

“Of course it hurts, you idiot. I just got shot. My left lung’s completely wrecked. The bullet got shot through me. Ahh, my coat...cough...”

Hampnie cursed, still sounding energetic. Then, he spat out some blood, finally realizing that he was hurt.

And he collapsed.

Ai was the only one standing, not knowing what was going on at all. Hampnie, who was aiming to shoot her, had collapsed, and was probably dead.

She did not know what to do, only hoping for a person to do something.

And thus, her wish was granted, for a man appeared.

“Wooooohhhh!”

The voice came from the opposite side of a road, and a man came galloping like a wild horse. Ai froze up, and the man grabbed her by the back of her neck, dragging her back ten steps in an exaggerated manner, before asking, “You alright!?”

“Wh-wh-wh-wha-what are you doing?”

“What else? Isn’t it rude of you to say that to your rescuer?”

The man shrugged, a smoking rifle resting upon his shoulder.

It was he who shot Hampnie to save Ai.

Ai recongized this, and wanted to bawl. She did not want to be saved in this manner.

“Daddy—”

Ai sobbied quietly, and turned around, wanting to run towards Hampnie. The man hurriedly grabbed her on the shoulder.

“What are you doing!?”

“Wait! Don’t approach him. He’s not dead yet!”

“Huh?”

At that moment, they heard a voice that should not be,

“Yuri! Tiger of Jiangdong! Dmitryevich! Hunter! My old friend! Hahahaha! I thought there was someone stalking over me the past few days, but I never thought it would be you!”

The man quickly raised his gun as quickly as Hampnie did.

He was aiming at the boy who should have been dead.

Ai hurried over.

“Good morning, you living bastards.”

Hampnie sneered, opening his blazing eyes as he got up, and nonchalantly pulled out a cigarette, lighting it.

“Feels good man. It’s like I’m born anew.”

Hampnie was chortling away, as thought amused by a hilarious joke.

And then, Hampnie went over excitedly.

“But it’s been a while since we met, Yuri! Has it been 5 years? Or 10? Why are you at such a place? Is there anything you want with me...”

“Don’t you move!”

The man pointed his gun with a grim face, a stark contrast to the jovial Hampnie.

“6 years! Hampnie Lambert! 6 years since you killed my wife!”

Eh? Ai looked back and forth between them. Hampnie clicked his tongue.

“Yuri, don’t put it that way, okay? I didn’t kill her. That’s something completely different.”

“...She’s basically killed by you.”

“Well, that’s basically what you think...I see. So you’re here for revenge, but six years isn’t a long time, you know?”

Hampnie exhaled a trail of purple smoke, sounding really disinterested.

“Then? What do you want from me?”

“A showdown!”

“A showdown? This is pretty old-fashioned...you mean the one involving to people turning their backs on each other, take ten steps, turn around, and bam?”

“Right! One honest showdown with me!”

Hampnie betrayed a perturbed look, and stroked his chin.

“A showdown, huh...but are you going to introduce yourself first? If you don’t mind, I’ll help you out there. Yuri, this little girl is Ai; she’s a gravekeeper.”

“Gravekeeper?”

Yuri looked towards Ai, who nodded silently.

“Right, a unique individual who had been taking care of all the Dead in this village. I just vetted her with another gravekeeper called Maria, whom you should have seen...”

Questions were appearing on Ai’s face. It felt unnatural for Hampnie to be explaining Ai’s predicament.

“Ah, hm, I see. A gravekeeper...”

“...Aren’t you too trusting?”

“There shouldn’t be any human of that age anyway.”

“...What?”

Hampnie widened his eyes, and seemed to have realized something as he asked Ai, “...Ai, how old are you?”

“12.”

She tilted her head, wondering what this question was about.

“You serious...damn. I’m the careless one.”

Hampnie showed a self-deprecating smile.

“What are you saying?”

“There were no children born since 15 years ago.”

She knew that. Yoki spoke of it every night.

God abandoned the world 15 years ago.

Ever since that day, humans no longer died, and were no longer born.

“So in other words, there’s no way you’re human.”

“Ahh!”

Ai punched her palm.

“Right! You’re so stupid, daddy! Nothing would have happened if you realized this!”

“Sorry, I don’t care about a pipsqueak’s age.”

Hampnie tossed a rock at Ai.

“What are you saying? What’s wrong with this village? This child...”

“Yuri.”

Seeing the doubt by this hunk, Hampnie tersely called him out.

“Do these questions help your revenge in any way? Can they save anyone?”

“ ...”

Amidst the spontaneous silence, there was an invisible exchange between the two.

“...No, forget about it. I’m not asking.”

“Really? Thanks...you’re the same like before.”

“I should be the one saying that.”

“No mistake about it.”

There really was an exchange Ai could not see.

“What are you talking about?”

“Sorry, sorry. Ai, this ‘guy’s called Yuri, my good friend. You’re familiar with his gun skills.”

Hampnie hammered his own chest, and the pointed at that man.

Yuri’s physique was more akin to a tiger, and not a human. He had his rifle raised the entire time, not showing any fatigue. His black hair and beard were well cared for, and he looked clearly refreshed.

The vibe he gave was akin to a massive, trained beast.

His blue eyes were removed from the sights as he glanced aside at Ai.

“The name’s Yuri. You can call me whatever you want.”

“ ...”

He’s cool!

“Y-you’re pretty!”

“...Never thought you would be the flirty type...that’s what you say when you meet others for the first time.”

Hampnie looked bemused by her.

“Pretty? Well that’s the first time someone said that about me. Thanks.”

“Yuri, don’t mind. This brat here loves gentlemanly uncles.”

“T-this isn’t what I mean...I just find him pretty.”

“Right right right, you’re right, whatever...but Yuri has a wife and daughter. We know each other since childhood...his wife died 7 years ago. Am I right, Yuri?”

“...Hm.”

“Eh? Then what you said ...”

“She died 7 years ago. 6 years ago, she was gunned down. As for what happened during that year ...”

He inhaled some smoke, and paused.

“This guy hid his dead wife from the gravekeepers, and brought his daughter along to live together.”

Ai felt a chill run down her spine, an utter sense of disgust flowing out in the form of cold sweat.

T-this!

It was unacceptable to both a gravekeeper or a human.

“H-how could you do this!”

“ ...”

Yuri remained silent, frowning in anguish.

“This guy suddenly left us without saying a word. I looked for him everywhere, and finally found him hiding in the dark hills, living together with a corpse. He’s really gone in the head.”

“...So that’s why you killed her?”

“I didn’t kill her.”

Hampnie unhappily took a puff.

“I just had some words with her, shot her, and burned her. That’s all.”

“You bastard—”

“I’m not going to look for any excuses, but this is one point I won’t concede...I hate the Dead.”

Hampnie narrowed his eyes, his crimson eyes glowing like magma.

“No matter whether I do like them or not, they’ll only pull the Living down... they rely on the Living for compassion, bring about plagues. No matter how wise a sage they may be, they become fools once their brains rot, and they only care about their desires...was she not like that too...Yuri?”

“Even so, it doesn’t matter to me! I’m still happy!”

“Hm, I guess so, but I can’t really accept that happiness of yours no matter what. I’ll have to apologize to you regarding that point alone, sorry.”

Saying that, Hampnie changed the topic,

“Now we understand each other a little better now, right? I’ll introduce myself then.”

Before he finished his words, he drew a gun and fired. The handgun was pointed at his neck as he fired, the pin hit the bolt, and the bullet shattered his teeth as it entered the chin, blowing up a large chunk of his brain, the cerebellum and the medulla.

Again, Hampnie fell to the ground.

“Dad...”

Daddy, what are you doing!?

Ai no longer had any idea of what was going on.

“Wait! He’s not dead!”

Yuri tugged Ai back.

“Hey...don’t...spoil everything, will you?”

Then, she heard a voice.

“Alright, you damn living bastards, I’m back. I’m the Man-Eating Doll. As you can see...”

Ai hastily turned her head around.

“I’m an immortal monster.”

She saw a sneer.

“...Been like this for 15 years. I don’t know the reason, but I should be the same like you, done in by that bastard of a God. Everyone else’s fated to either live or die, and I’m the only one forced to remain alive. I know this.”

Hampnie rattled on. Seeing him like this, Ai doubted all possibilities. First ...

“It’s an act.”

Yuri said. His voice was filled with conviction, and there was no faltering in his eyes.

“That’s your old tactic, using your unique appearance and stunts to get people to think that you’re an immortal monster. That’s not going to work on me.”

“Hey, didn’t you see the gun just now?”

“The gun’s yours, and the bullets are yours. You could have tampered it all you like.”

“What about the shot fired? Didn’t you fire the gun?”

“Even my bullets can be tampered with.”

Yuri said.

“Play dead. That’s always been your favoured tactic.”

“...You say that, but where’s the blood going to come from? What about the wounds? What about the feeling of hitting me? My corpse. How are you going to explain all of that?”

“Where are they then?”

Yuri mocked. There should be no blood, no wounds, and no corpse. Hampnie was speechless.

“There’s no proof of you dying and reviving, right? You were bloody all over, and now you’re standing here with no problems. Isn’t it an exaggeration to say that you’re immortal?”

Yuri’s blue eyes remained blazing as he narrated his thoughts.

“You’re just manipulating, acting like the character that’s the Man-Eating Doll. Hampnie, don’t you think this thinking is a lot more realistic?”

“...I see.”

Yuri continued to loudly declare,

“Your immortal body is just a hoax! I’ll prove this!”

“I see. I, see.”

Hampnie nodded firmly.

“So you’re trying to say that I’m just an ordinary, vain bloke with white skin?”

“Right!”

“There’s no proof, but you’re going to ignore the devastation after you shot me, right?”

“...Right.”

“Being immortal is just a lie. You want a showdown against me, and kill me, right?”

“Right!”

“I see.”

So Hampnie repeated himself a few times, inhaled from the cigarette, and exhaled it, “Are you crazy?”

“...What did you say?”

“Your logic sounds reasonable, but it’s all over the place. You’re saying I’m just pretending to be a monster? If that’s from a person I met the first time, then that person’s a bumbling fool, but pretty decisive to take it as the ending to a story. Yuri, this isn’t the first time we met. You know my methods, and this entire act is created by you. Why are you trying to fight me through your stupid

guess? This is no different from suicide ...”

Saying this, Hampnie realized something, and stopped.

“Hey, Yuri.”

“...What?”

“What happened to you daughter?”

Yuri did not answer. Ai asked, “His child?”

“Yes. I remember she’s 15 this year. The name’s Noemi. I chose that name. it’s a nice name, isn’t it?”

Ai nodded.

“To be honest, why are you only showing up today? It’s been six years, and you probably had lots of chances to meet me. You know where I usually hang out, and I never really changed places. Why wait till today?”

“ ...”

“Isn’t it better to take revenge as possible? You spent a happy life with your daughter, surely? Why wait till this day, 6 years later?”

For every word Yuri heard, some strength was seeped from him. Then, Hampnie summarized the matter, “Is she dead?”

“...You bastard!”

“I see, so she died.”

Hampnie inhaled on the smoke, and burned through the cigarette before he exhaled. The thick purple smoke rose slowly, like a cremation.

“Was she ill?”

“...Yes, just last month.”

“Did you bury her properly this time?”

“You bastard!”

“Answer me.”

Hampnies sneered, but he was serious.

“...I performed the proper burial.”

“Great. So...”

Hampnie smiled. Gone was the forlorn look as he gave an impish smirk.

“So you came here, hoping to die in my hands, because you haven’t found a reason to live, right?”

Yuri’s jaws slackened.

“What are you saying...I’m here for revenge...”

“Revenge, revenge, revenge. Those words really do sound nice. I like that, since they’re human.”

Hampnie was beaming away, chirping as he chuckled.

“But your inconsistent motives aren’t a good thing.”

He clicked his tongue, swagging his finger.

“...What are you getting at?”

“If we’re talking about how fast you’re taking revenge, what have you been doing over the last 6 years?”

Yuri couldn’t say anything.

“I know, since we’re friends. You enjoyed living with your daughter in the city, right? Over those days, you forgot about taking revenge for your wife, didn’t you?”

“Shut up!”

Yuri was agitated, and pointed his gun at Ai’s head.

“Eh?”

“Shut up, or I’ll shoot her.”

“W-wait a moment! This doesn’t involve me, right?”

“Hahahahaha! Yuri! What’s the matter? You think you’re mad?”

“You there, please stop taunting! You’re cruel!”

“Ai, don’t worry. Yuri won’t shoot.”

Hampnie was overly confident, chortling.

“Yuri, stop trying to act insane already. You’re not thorough with your motives, you’re just focusing on the result. No, you’re just trying to bluff yourself, and that’s worse.”

“...What are you saying?”

“Find anyone you’re familiar with, and ask them. Tell them you want to kill Hampnie Lambert, see what they say. 10 in 10 will say “That’s suicidal”...simply put, you just don’t want to live anymo, but you hate that you’ll probably die alone, so you just thought of dying for some purpose, like dying while taking revenge for your wife...well, it doesn’t matter. It’s not like we aren’t familiar with each other, and I can end things off for you...unfortunately, I’m a bad man.”

Hampnie chortled, mocking him like a demon eating away at human lamentations.

“I’m not going to make your death meaningful in any way.”

Darkness befell upon them. Before they knew it, the day ended, and night had arrived.

“If you’re fine with that, come here at dawn the next day. I accept your challenge.”

Saying that, Hampnie blended into the darkness, not leaving a trace behind.

Ai lifted her head towards Yuri, who moved the gun away from her. This ferocious man had become an animal specimen that was shot down by a hunter.

Yuri’s knees buckled, and he fell to the floor like a giant corpse.

Part IV

The various tools were gathered. Her change of clothes were packed, along with food, money (though she felt they were of use, she never used them before). Sleeping equipment was packed, along with rainy equipment ...

It was late at night. Ai was packing her belongings. She rummaged through her sturdy backpack, and crammed in everything she felt she needed. There was a limit to how much she could move, so she checked through the various tools, picked accordingly, and confined herself to a few she had to bring. She could not bring anything unnecessary along.

So, how many snacks was she to bring? Ai faced the large pile of personal snacks she stored, and groaned, before deciding that she would only bring candy along. She poured the transparent bottle over, emptied the candies into the backpack, and shoved aside the remaining snacks.

Her preparations were nearly done, and she lifted the bottle placed next to her. This little bottle had an elegant shape, with a spray installed. She removed the cap, and pressed the spray.

Anna's scent spread across the room.

Ai had a whiff of this lemon, soap mist, waiting for it to stick upon her body.

On that night, Ai remained in her room. She applied perfume on herself for the first time.

She kept the bottle, slipped it into a bag, and stuffed it into her backpack. Her backpack was completely full. She sighed, looked over at the pile of sweets and books that were not packed, and finally gave up on them.

She brought quite a fair bit of items.

Ai sat on the floor, surveying the abandoned things in the room. The handmade clothes and dolls the grannies made for her birthday, the many tools

belonging to her, and the ceiling that accompanied her for her entire lifetime.

If possible, she wanted to bring the air along, but she could not, so ...

She carried the shovel her mother used.

She harbored the stories her foster father told her of.

She applied the perfume of her foster mother.

These were the only things she intended to bring along.

Once she was done with her preparations, Ai stood at the door, had a look at the room, and started to cry again. Upon thinking that she would never return again, she really felt the urge to cry, and had the urge to cry herself to sleep in the bed she did not use in the morning. She hoped that by doing so, everything would return to normal, and she could continue living like before, that it was all just a nightmare.

She knew it was impossible, but she had such an urge to think.

“Waaaaaahhhh!”

Ai yelled out loud, leapt at the pile of sweets, and in the blink of an eye, she gobbled up the treasure stove.

Cookies, nougats, roasted buns, fried bread, sweets, dried strawberries.

All the sweetness filling her mouth had her feeling that she was done enjoying all sweetness in life.

“...I don't want to see sweets again.”

Saying those words, Ai was finally prepared to leave the village.

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The sun remained asleep beyond the mountains, but in another few hours, dawn would break.

Ai stood at the entrance of the village, watching. The two combatants should be nearby, and begin killing each other when dawn breaks.

Ai had no intention to stop them. She stood there silently, waiting.

And after a while, the man she was waiting for appeared.

“...Who’s there?”

The Man-Eating Doll’s skin was whiter than the clear moon in the night, appearing in the darkness.

“Morning, daddy.”

“...You? Tch, so you’ve been waiting here?”

“Morning. You can at least say a greeting, no, daddy?”

“Right, right, morning.”

Hampnie too was done packing his belongings. Ai was right.

“...So, what are you doing at this time? It’s a long time till sunrise.”

“What else? I’m running away. Getting out of here as soon as I can.”

Hampnie said without a beat.

“There’s no way Yuri and I could have had a showdown. Are you kidding me?”

“...I see.”

Ai suddenly smiled. Her smile appeared to be both a genuine one and a leery one.

She had expected Hampnie to say that.

Ai knew he was lying when he spoke up the previous day.

“...What are you smiling for? It’s really unnerving ...”

“No, I’m just thinking that you’re really kind, daddy.”

“Kind?”

Hampnie gave a disgusted smile.

“Ai, you’re mistaken. Taking death away from those who seek death isn’t a kind thing. I’m evil. Haven’t we gone through this already?”

“But even so...your motives are kind.”

Hampnie never expected her to say this, and for a moment, was taken aback.

“...Hmph, I don’t care.”

Saying that, he turned his back on the village.

Ai followed.

“...What? You’re coming along? You aren’t going to be a gravekeeper now?”

“...No.”

Ai answered, and took a step back, carrying the shovel that she had dragged along.

“But I want to come along...you may not of so, and everyone else that’s dead might feel the same, but I’m coming along.”

“Why?”

“Because I hope to.”

“...Hmph!”

Hampnie snorted at her reply. He turned around, not saying anything, merely conveying the words “As you wish” with his back.

So Ai didn’t answer as she began walking silently.

And the two started their two day journey.

Chapter 2 - The Trials Brought Forth by My Birthright and Honor

Part I

Both of them trekked down the road that really couldn't be considered as one.

"Yuri's a natural born hunter. We need to pull our distance while we have the chance."

So Hampnie said, and Ai was not displeased about that. What she was unhappy about though ...

"Daddy! That tree is rotting! You can't lean on it..."

"Woah!"

She was unhappy about Hampnie's shocking clumsiness.

Hampnie's gestures and actions seemed different from his feeble body typical of an Albino, but it seemed he was unused to trekking the hills. Ai had to guide him on which paths to walk, warn him about certain dangerous branches, and at times, had to carry him about. He had become nothing more than a baggage.

And like before, he lost his balance, nearly tumbling down the slope.

"Are-are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

But Ai did not feel that he was fine, for his right ankle was twisted in a manner it should not be.

“Going uphill is okay, but going downhill is a lot worse...”

Saying that, Hampnie naturally drew out a knife. Ai hurriedly turned aside.

The little stab sounded so shrill.

“Oh good~ all refreshed and recovered. Let’s keep going.”

“Uu~please stop doing that~ it’s really unnerving.”

“Sorry, sorry. It’s pretty useful after all.”

Whenever Hampnie died, the wounds and holes in his body would be healed up completely, and he would revive as a normal person. He had died many times having taken advantage of this benefit.

“Please don’t die just because it’s useful. There’s nothing more annoying than this to a gravekeeper.”

“Alright, don’t be angry. What, you’re sleepy?”

“No I’m not! I’m talking about the principles of Life!”

The more she spoke, the more infuriated she was. She felt that she was being conned. It seemed that over the last night they stayed up, he died a few times. There was no winning when trying to talk him down. Furthermore, she was really exhausted.

“But thanks to you, it looks like we made it to the road. Look.”

There were forests on the hills, and the lights were dim. Even so, the sky appeared a lot brighter, the sun had risen completely, and there was mist in the lively forest.

There was a pavement behind the mist.

“It’s a lot easier to walk now, thanks to you, Ai. Never thought you’re this capable.”

“R-really? No problems.”

Ai felt conflicted to be praised by Hampnie.

They arrived on the road, and finally saw daylight, along with the warm spring sun in the sky, covered beneath some clouds.

Ai looked up at the sun, and naturally gave a huge yawn

“You’re so sleepy , and yet you’re acting tough.”

Hampnie noted with glee.

Ai blushed, and pouted.

In fact, she was really tired. Ai had stayed up for the night, and had no way to relieve her fatigue.

“...No problems. Let’s hurry.”

Ai lifted her shovel again, and moved forward. “Need me to carry you?”
Hampnie said to her back.

“Huh?”

“Isn’t it more comfortable for me to carry you? You can sleep for a while.”

Ai lifted her eyes at Hampnie.

“.....Daddy, what’s wrong with you? Why are you acting like a real daddy?”

“You’re always saying things that can be retorted.”

“B-but...”

He was going to carry her.

“...Aren’t you...embarrassed?”

“Embarrassed? I wasn’t embarrassed when you carried me.”

“That’s not what I mean...”

“Who cares? Tie your luggage together.”

“.....Daddy, what’s wrong with you? Why are you acting like a real daddy?”

“You’re always saying things that can be retorted.”

“B-but...”

He was going to carry her.

“...Aren’t you...embarrassed?”

“Embarrassed? I wasn’t embarrassed when you carried me.”

“That’s not what I mean...”

“Who cares? Tie your luggage together.”

While feeling perturbed, Hampnie began his own preparations. So stubborn yet so concerned he was.

“Get up.”

He knelt down, turning his back on Ai.

Woah.....

Ai’s face was blushing as she looked right and left.

“No-nobody’s looking, right?”

“Of course there won’t be anyone else in the hills here...and even if there is, it doesn’t matter, right?”

“Of course it does, you shameless person!”

“Shameless? Really? Alright, let’s forget about it then, okay?”

Hampnie tilted his head, asking mischievously..

Ai struggled and groaned, looking around. Finally, she stopped hesitating, and gingerly wrapped her arms around Hampnie’s neck.

“Righto.”

Hampnie easily got up.

“I-I’m not heavy?”

“Very, but no biggie.”

Ai’s line of sight was taller than usual, and she sighed, spacing out as though she had a fever.

“Hehe.”

“What’s with the disgusting leer?”

“...You’re acting like a daddy, daddy.”

So she started giggling away.

“.....”

This time, Hampnie did not jest, and answered only with silence.

“Why aren’t you talking...”

“...Nothing. Just had a little dream, that’s all...right, let’s go.”

“Alright! Wait, daddy, what are you doing?”

Hampnie began tying a rope and cloth to fasten Ai down.

“I think this is different from the carrying I know of ...”

“Don’t think too much.”

They resembled a mountaineer rescuer and a rescued.

“Let’s go!”

“Eh?No, wait! Wahhhhhhh!!”

Hampnie suddenly ran at full speed, darting down the decrepit hill path with the speed of a wild beast.

“What are you doing!?”

“We wasted too much time. Need to hurry. Didn’t I say it’ll be bumpy? Just relax and sleep all you want.”

“Are you an idiot?”

A wild horse he was being.

And Ai was struggling on the horse.

“This isn’t carrying! I’m not happy at all! I ask for something more decent!”

“Look, Ai, we’re going to stick close to the walls and invade at zero altitude.”

“Wooahhh—!”

Hampnie kept running in an unreasonable posture, bringing Ai close to the walls or floor from time to time.

“What are you doing?”

“That’s weird. I loved playing like this with my old man.”

“I’m not a boy!”

Hampnie was guffawing away happily, not depressed in the slightest. Seeing him react this way, Ai had to give up, lean her chin on his shoulder, and have him shake about.

“...Well, it’s not like I didn’t expect this...”

“Really? Great!”

“But are you able to keep running so quickly? You haven’t slowed down at all...”

Saying that, she had a bad feeling.

At this moment, Hampnie slowed down, and a stab could be heard, causing all strength to be seeped away. Ai felt a chill down the back she was hugging, and right when he was about to lose balance...

His legs regained strength again as he stomped hard onto the ground.

“Right! I can do it!”

“Wait! What did you just do? Did you...”

“Yeah, I died.”

“Nooo! Please don’t die in my arms!”

“Shut up...oh yeah, if you’re not sleeping, can you stab my heart for me?”

“I don’t wanna!”

“Hurry up and sleep then. Let me see...”

Saying that, Hampnie leapt high towards a cliff.

“This should make it easier, right?”



“Noooo— — — —!”

Ai’s scream echoed through the hills.

•

“Oi, ,Ai, time to wake up.”

Ai woke up, and found herself lying on the ground.

“...Eh? Where am I...”

“Hahaha, you’re a stubborn one. You were sleeping so soundly there even after saying you can’t sleep.”

“ ...”

Ai weakly lifted her head, and found the sky to be dyed orange. It seemed she had spent half the day sleeping...no, she wasn’t sleeping. She remained groggy.

That was her falling unconscious.

“We’ll stop running for today. Help start a fire.”

Hampnie landed on the ground, dusting the place so that he could sleep.

“Did I really sleep for half a day?”

“What else?”

“...Where is this place?”

“South of Mount Nilpetz. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Ai shook her head.

“Goodness. Then have a look at this.”

Hampnie took out a tattered map that appeared to be used for a very, very long time. He opened a page, and appearing on it was a large half island distant from the continent.

He continued to flip through the pages, and the scale kept shrinking.

“The village you lived in is around here, and our location is around here.”

Ai watched, completely engrossed.

“...Doesn't feel like we advanced much...”

Given his prior speed, they should have advanced quite a fair distance.

“Yeah, because I got lost, sorta.”

“Never thought you're useless, daddy.”

“Hahaha, sorry sorry.”

Hampnie grabbed Ai's head.

“...But the sun is setting. Mr Yuri probably won't find us, right?”

“Really? Thank goodness.”

Saying that, Hampnie used his luggage as a pillow. It seemed that for this day, they would not be continuing their exodus; they would not be doing anything.

Ai decided to make her own bed. She used a poncho to make a windshaft, used same twigs to build a tripod fire, used a pot to boil some water, add some tea leaves, and roasted some bread and meat.

“I'm done. Please have some for yourself.”

She quickly prepared a meal.

“What, I have some too? I'll just have some tea.”

“You're not hungry?”

“I just died.”

Ai tilted her head, and then looked around, taking sips from time to time, shaking about agitatedly.

After a while, she ceased these gestures, put her bowl down, straightened her back, and looked towards Hampnie.

“Daddy.”

“What?”

“I think this isn't a good thing.”

“What's not a good thing?”

“Erm...we should be eating together...”

“But I don’t eat anything whenever I go for trips..”

“So have some...”

“Those are yours, right? Save them. It’s a waste for me to eat them now.”

“But...”

“You’re annoying. Didn’t I say that I won’t be eating?”

Hampnie glared at her.

But Ai was not intimidated. Her eyes looked terrified and confused, but she was not intimidated.

“So I say, **this isn’t good**, I think.”

“...What did you say?”

“I don’t think you should be acting...erm...like a monster?”

“Act?”

“Yes. You can do anything you want when you’re alone, daddy...but if you’re with others, you should get along with others.”

Ai had been thinking about this. Having seen Hampnie die before her eyes over and over again, she felt that he would really transform into a monster, and was really terrified of that.

“Daddy, didn’t you say that if I am to live with others, I should ...”

“No, this...”

Hampnie kept staring at Ai, who was surprisingly perturbed.

“Damn it, me and my big mouth.”

And then, he slapped himself on his forehead.

“...Sorry, I’ll eat.”

“Yay!”

Ai handed over the bread gleefully. Finally, the two of them shared dinner together.

Night fell, and the fire cackled. Hampnie nibbled at the bread,

“...It’s not like I don’t eat at all. I’ll go along with the flow as long as there’s enough to eat.”

He was trying to excuse himself,

“Uu...so what? You need I don’t need to act?”

“Right.”

Ai bit her bread, and lifted her head. Hampnie waved her hand, stopping her.

“Normally , I’ll try to blend in so that others won’t think that I’m a monster. Never thought that you will think this way...didn’t think I have such emotions either...guess I thought of you as a person, a monster just like me.”

Ai frowned, gnawing at the bread to vent her frustration.

“I’m really angry.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.”

“Of course, I don’t like that you think of me as a monster...but I hate that you think of yourself as a monster.”

“Huh? But I’m clearly a monster, right...?”

“Not at all.”

“Nothing wrong about it. I’m Hampnie Hambert, an immortal monster.”

“Do-do you have to define it like that? Do you have to say that you’re a monster?”

“What are you saying...”

“Umm～how do I put it...”

Ai frowned, pondering, “You’re serious about a lot of things, right daddy?”

“Thought-wise, you mean?”

“Yeah, you see, daddy, you’re really strict. Right and right, what can and can’t be done, living and dead, humans and monster...it’s like you define them really clearly, and you tread the line.”

“...Go on.”

“But do you have to define things so clearly? Can’t you relax on that? I don’t think it’s a good thing to define good and bad...”

Ai could not define everything so clearly like Hampnie. She had seen little, and worried much. She never had the confidence to believe that whatever she did was right. But...

“Um～ it’s really hard to put it clearly.”

Seeing Ai cup her head in frustration, Hampnie smiled, “Don’t force the issue then. Your frustrations aren’t just about me. It also involves how your life will go.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s something like being enlightened ...you’re slowly building your personality, but it’s not accepting of me, and that’s why you’re frustrated... there are some things you can’t say now, but one day, you’ll be able to speak naturally. Before then, keep brooding.”

Ai sized up Hampnie, and slowly nodded,

“Yes, I will.”

Hampnie grimaced.

“Really doesn’t sound like something I’ll say...better forget about it.”

“I won’t forget! I’m happy. This really gave me lots of things to think.”

“Don’t say that, I’ll blush.”

Hampnie fanned his face with his hand, looking really embarrassed.

Ai giggled as she swallowed the bread. There were some things she had to ask, but first was ...

“On that day 15 years ago, I was a student.”

Hampnie suddenly spoke up.

And Ai, who was about to say something, remained still, her mouth agape.

Hampnie took her words as doubt, and asked, “Do you know what a school is?”

“Of course, I know that.”

During her life in the village, Yoki and some of the more knowledgeable would find time to teach her. They were experts in their specialties, like common language, mathematics, sciences, humanities, combat, tactics, medicine, and various skills people would have.

“Really? Well I’ll say this first. The school I speak of is a detention facility that sorts distractions to human society called brats according to age.”

“...I never heard of such a school before.”

The school Ai heard of was a lot happier than that.

But this topic piqued her interest.

“But daddy, you actually go to school...I never thought you would.”

“I do get a day off every week though.”

“You played truant, didn’t you? I know what playing truant is.”

“Nope, this.”

Hampnie said, grabbing at his white hair, making a funny face with his red eyes.

“This is the characteristic of an Albino. We’re weak to sunlight. The weather may be nice to you, but it’s too much more me. If I stay outdoors for an entire day, my body will be burned red. Also, my kidneys have problems, so there’s always swelling. Without any daily massages, I can’t maintain my handsome face.”

Ai lowered her head silently.

“What?”

“...Sorry, I...”

“Enough, don’t pity me. That face annoys me. Anyway, a lot of effort is required whenever I go to school, since the sun itself is too fatal. I need to wear long sleeves no matter the season, and I need to wake up early and spend lots of time applying suntan lotion. I needed my parents to send me to school, and fetch me from school. I needed the help of Yuri and the other classmates to get

to school.”

“Why go that far though...”

“Think about it. Everyone went to school.”

Hampnie’s eyes beamed even when seen through the sunglasses.

“So I had to go to school. It’s just that simple.”

Ai lifted her head towards him, thinking his smile was filled with pride. Even before or after his curse, this man continued to live according to his principles.

“Eh? But you’re a student 15 years ago...how old are you now, daddy?”

“Hm? I was in the same year as Yuri, so about thirty.....two? Or three? I forgot.”

“...Anyway, the word immortal doesn’t seem to go along with that age.”

“Even an immortal’ is zero years old at birth. I’m not lying.”

Ai nodded in realization, and tilted her head. She felt she was being bluffed.

And then, she suddenly noticed—

“Daddy, what are you trying to say?”

This was an interesting topic, but Ai did not understand why he was talking about this.

“Don't think too much into this,...I just want to get something clear, so listen... you don’t know about what happened ‘that night’, right?”

Hampnie quietly continued,

“Basically, ‘The Night God Left’. You know?”

“You’re asking if I know? Didn’t he say ‘the other world is overflowing, this world will also come to an end. Ahh, I failed’?”

Ai recited it perfectly.

“I see. So that’s what they taught you?”

“...is there something wrong about that?”

Yoki—or rather, the villagers told her so.

“No. Many do still think this way. I might say this is the most commonly accepted line of thinking. However, I never actually heard those words.”

“Eh?”

“At first, nobody noticed ‘that day’ came. Like usual, I got up and went to school. There was nothing on the newspapers, the Heavens and the Earth never split apart, and of course, there was no proclamation by God. That’s just what humans said later on.”

Feeling perturbed, Hampnie asked, “Why has everyone forgotten about this”. He got up hastily, and brought his face over.

“Wh-what are you thinking?”

“This is my own theory. Want to hear it?”

Ai looked a little confused, and nodded,

“I think that God is an idiot.”

“The word sacrilege is meant for people like you.”

“Hear me out. This is just my guess, but I’m guessing that God’s too lazy to be bothered to deal with the logical, like physics, or the conservation of energy. It’s not like I don’t understand how He feels though, since the world he created was perfect, without any conflicting issues. However, it’s also pointless, and we can’t blame Him for wanting to forget about this. So, we have to forgive Him.”

“Why are you acting so uppity?”

“I guess that’s the reason why He wanted to grant Humanity’s wishes at the last moment.”

Hampnie laid back down with a thud.

“I don’t really know how to explain the point about humans unable to be born, but the thing about humans being unable to die is probably just because they don’t want to die. Isn’t this Humanity’s wish? It’s a messy way of doing this, but this wish has been fulfilled, somehow...soon after, Humanity has the urge to die, so God sent the gravekeepers. It’s a long way of putting it, but He probably assumed he fulfilled Humanity’s wishes ...”

“Ehhhh?”

“Didn’t I say this is just my own thought?”

Hampnie’s 17 year old face was showing the smile of a 32 year old.

“I suppose this is the case though, since I have witnessed many miracles myself.”

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?”

Hampnie chuckled,

“Well, this immortality does fulfil my wish, somehow. My condition was stabilized those days, I was feeling healthy, and I could breathe, my heart’s beating regularly. I could go out running everywhere too. That was the wish I made when I was 17, that ‘this day can continue to live on’.”

“...Is that so?”

“This isn’t important.” So Hampnie said as he reverted back to the old topic. “After ‘that day’, society didn’t change at all, but everything came to an end. It seemed the communist sphere and the Monarchies tried to hide this fact initially, but in the end, it was a waste of effort. Humanity could not deal with so many of the Dead, but they were welcomed. The laws, common sense, the insurance industry, those things went amok. The smart ones started to store assets. To be honest, Humanity’s really sturdy, but once something goes wrong with such an establishment, the rest will fall like dominoes.”

Ai was familiar with what happened next.

First, there were calamities. An earthquake occurred in a corner of the world, causing the deaths of five thousand. The evacuation work was delayed, resulting in the Dead being completely rotten. These five thousand ended up becoming some form of a sacrifice for the demon, incubating a new plague that was later called the ‘half-dead plague’, or a ‘plague’ that results in a 50% mortality rate, but the name itself was a misnomer, the actual number of deaths was fewer than half of what was expected, and a cure could have been found immediately. The plague itself lasted no more than 4 years.

But this half-dead plague took away the lives of 200 million.

At the same time, it meant that 200 million Dead happened.

Such a number was enough to cause the world to collapse.

“You really know your stuff.”

Once Ai stated this, an impressed Hampnie praised her.

“But you don’t know the nuance behind this, right? Ai, did you only see the Dead the last time?”

Ai nodded. She nodded away silently, without showing any emotion.

“Is that so? Then, get this clear. This doesn’t just apply for the ‘half-dead plague’. Once a person dies with all organs intact, they will have the same appearance as when they’re alive. After a while though, their bodies will start to break down, either because of water oozing, or parched skin, or maggots growing out of their bodies, even in the brains protected by the head and the skullcap. The human mind will start rotting from the outside, first lowering the functions of the frontal lobe that controls intellect, and the consciousness will be appeared by the cerebellum, the sturdiest part. You know what happens next?”

Ai gulped, and shook her head.

“People become stubborn. They’re dead, but their survival instincts get stronger, and they get into an awful mood. Once people start to experience such changes, things will get worse. Even if it’s a wise sage we’re talking about, they’ll end up no different from the wild beasts. Living with such people... restraining emotions just like that. That is a tragedy.”

Ai guessed what he was implying.

“So, you...shot Mr Yuri’s wife?”

Surely Hampnie wanted to talk about this.

“...”

But Hampnie did not say anything.

“Daddy?”

“...No...hm, you’re right. I can’t forgive the Dead.”

“Ah, huh...”

Saying this, Hampnie went silent.

Ai felt uneasy, thinking that she might have been mistaken.

“Are you done with your story?”

“Yeah, I’m done with my story...don’t you have other things to ask me? Ask away.”

The campfire crackle, and the still damp branches were steaming.

Ai silently wiped the utensils cleanly with the bread, and finished the bread. Then, she brought the tea to her knees, looking into the cup, saying, “...Will you answer what I asked?”

“Who knows? Maybe I won’t. Maybe I’ll lie.”

“...I guess...that’s fine. I’ll ask.”

Ai lifted her head.

“Why did you do that?”

Naturally, she was referring to the slaughter of the village.

Just thinking back about it left her on the verge of breaking down into tears. If that had not happened, if that did not happen at all, surely she could have lived on comfortably there.

Hampnie laid down, lowering his eyelids, and said,

“What other reason is there to fight? Since the dawn of time, that never changed. It’s all for Justice.”

“Justice...”

“Right. I shot them, because there’s a dark, corrupted sense of justice in the depths of my heart.”

“Is everyone...so evil...that you had to kill them?”

“...Yes.”

He sounded really bitter.

Yet Ai could believe his words. There was some filthy secret in the village.

“What bad thing...did everyone do?”

Hampnie’s justice. Everyone’s evil. The village’s secret. Ai’s existence.

Everything should be intertwined. Ai wanted to know the link between them.

Night quiet down, and the insects of Spring cricketed away. All that was left was the fire and the chirps.

“...You’re not going to answer?”

Hampnie held a cigarette, and lit it with a burning red bit of charcoal.

“Yes, I don’t want to answer.”

“But!”

“You’ll figure out the truth one day.”

Ai remained still.

“If you spend enough time with society at large, you’ll figure it out. No matter whether you like it or not, you’ll figure out the evil of that village...and then... you’ll definitely cry, no? I don’t want to see such an annoying scene, and those guys too ...”

There were three points of light beyond the fire. One was the cigarette, and the other two were Hampnie’s red eyes.

“I think the worst scenario they want is for me to tell you the answer ...”

“Eh?”

“The villagers I blew up. You’ll know the secret, but it’s too cruel if I’m the one telling you...”

The purple smoke rose, and scattered, blending into the night with the smoke from the fire.

“You’re...right.”

Ai was slowly starting to get what Hampnie was intending. She understood, and faced him directly, saying,



“I guess everyone’s hoping for me to figure it out.”

“Really...do your best then.”

“Okay!”

Ai answered with much enthusiasm, and decided to bury the question deep into her heart.

Until the day the mystery was to be solved.

“And, there’s something else I want to ask...”

“Hm? There is? What is it?”

“Who’s the Miss Hana you speak of?”

The cigarette smoke fluttering in the darkness suddenly stopped.

“You asked Miss Scar and me about her, didn’t you? You were looking for her, weren’t you, daddy?”

“Ah～ahhh～what are you talking about? Did you mishear?”

“Between thirty to forty, brown hair, black eyes, a nice face, of similar height to daddy, small breasts. This is the description of Miss Hana, right?”

“...Some memory you have.”

“Remembering the characteristics of a person’s appearance is a very important skill to a gravekeeper after all.”

Ai giggled, puffing her chest proudly.

“So, daddy. Why are you looking for Miss Hana?”

“I can tell you...but you might be outraged...”

“I won’t! It’s fine!”

Ai’s eyes were glittering, the light roaming around the fire. Hampnie grimaced. The mood had livened up just after one question.

“Right right right. I’ll say it...I love that woman called Hana.”

“Lo-love...”

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s a long time since our one encounter ...but we had the

same dreams.”

Hampnie slowly opened his eyes, looking at the cackling flames.

Ai looked completely flabbergasted.

“...Hm? What’s wrong? You look like you have the urge to pee at the toilet or something.”

“You...”

“Hm?”

“You traitor～!”

Ai was raging.

“You already have mama, and you still...! You～!”

Ai threw a tantrum, stomping the ground.

“Eh? No, ehh?”

“You have no restrain! Gigolo! Sex demon! You ero man even though you're so white!”

“Eh? Why am I being scolded?”

Her intense rage left Hampnie bewildered.

But at the next moment, Ai realized that she was in the wrong, and calmed down.

“But looking at things now, mama’s dead. As the daughter, I should allow papa to find his second wind...?”

“He-hello, Ai?”

“Uuu, what should I do?”

“Listen to me! You idiot!”

Hampnie smacked her on the head.

“Seriously, I had enough of you yapping away at me non-stop. Hey! Ai! Stop calling me daddy already! I had enough!”

“Eh～?”

“Eh~your foot! And why are you so certain? Didn’t you say that you hope for your father to be some good looking bearded uncle in his forties or something!?”

Hampnie, who took her as lightly as he did with the gravekeepers, finally touched on the topic at hand.

“That’s what I hope to begin with...”

Ai puffed her cheeks, stating unhappily.

“But daddy, you’re still daddy.”

“You ain’t intending to talk human with me, right?”

“That’s not it...eerm—eh—”

“...Hey. Ai. Just to ask, is this just your way of life?”

“Way of life?”

“Yeah. You’re trying to bind me down with those words, but that won’t work. As long as the situation calls for it, I’ll shoot you...stop calling me that before you get used to it.”

“That’s not it!”

Ai got up.

“That’s not...it. Is that what you think of me...daddy?”

Ai weakly collapsed to the ground, looking extremely despondent.

“...Actually, I’m a little sick of it. It’s a nightmare to think of you as daddy. I do wonder why this person is daddy...but what can I do about it? It’s fact.”

“So I’m asking you for the reason. Tell me. Is my request that unreasonable?”

Ai’s green eyes were ablaze.

“Isn’t it obvious!?”

The voices of the insects were immediately quelled, along with the sound of the flames.

“You’re daddy! I can tell! You can’t? You don’t feel anything even after seeing your daughter? We’re family!”

Hampnie closed his eyes silently.

Ai could tell Hampnie was thinking about the possibility of a family member. He had just met a daughter for the first time in over ten years, and was wondering if he could actually tell, and believe that she was his daughter.

“Maybe I can’t do it.”

He opened his blazing eyes, saying this. Ai knew he would have said this.

“...I guess so. Since you can’t tell ...”

“Yeah, I can’t tell. I really can’t.”

He tossed the cigarette into the fire, and it vanished immediately . “Sorry, I’ll have some sleep. There’s a lot of things...I can’t figure out.”

Hampnie turned his body around, and went to sleep.

Ai watched his back sadly.

Hampnie kept pondering as he listened to the insects and the flames. Ai’s words had him reflecting.

His common sense advised him that he could not possibly have any children. The simple reason was that before the day of beckoning 15 years ago, he was deemed infertile.

Red eyes, white skin, white hair, immortal.

These robbed him the ability to manifest descendents, so Ai’s words were completely wrong. In that case, he could have told her so, ensuring that she had no room to run.

So he thought, but he decided against it.

Surely she would not have minded even with that issue.

(It’s obvious? That’s a bold way of putting it.)

He clicked his tongue, and turned around.

The gravekeeper with the scar on her face did say that. She said that she could tell without needing to identify or think. It was ridiculous to think about,

even without factoring intellect and common sense.

(But...)

Hampnie slightly widened his eyes, and spotted the little gravekeeper seated on the other side of the fire, pouting as she poked at it.

(Maybe the brat's right after all ...)

The sleepiness slowly arose from deep inside his mind.

Hampnie had dismissed it as 'impossible' through knowledge and common sense.

Ai felt that it was 'possible' simply due to instinct.

Hampnie did not think that he was wrong. However, he found her impressive to declare a stranger family without any proof.

(Goodness, Hampnie, you're a stubborn fool. You know that the little 'dream' may be fulfilled if you follow what she says ...)

The sleepiness and fatigue numbed his mind, and his soul pondered over things he should not be thinking of.

(But if I accept her, I...won't be myself...)

His consciousness sank into the darkness, and he never dreamt.

•

She had a dream.

She dreamt of herself back when she was five, scaling the roof with her mother.

"Gyahahahaha!"

"Ahahahahaha!"

Her mother was guffawing away like a villain boasting her secret weapon, and Ai too followed suit.

"Ai, look! This is my village."

Her mother pointed towards the village. The village in the memories seemed

so young, and the villagers who had not changed at all were scurrying around.

It was autumn, Ai's favorite season. Everyone was building scarecrows. Yut, Daigo, even Yoki and Anna who just arrived at the village, were all beaming away.

Upon seeing that scene, Ai immediately teared up.

"Now now, why are you crying?"

Ai's mother wiped the tears off the face, yet Ai said nothing. She was five when she was here, so she should not be crying.

The 12 year old Ai realized she was dreaming, and this dream would vanish, so she hurriedly shook off her sadness.

"I'm fine, mama."

"Gyahaha, now why are you crying when there's nothing? You're really a crybaby."

Her mother said, and beamed.

Her mother had golden hair, just like her, and it was glittering under the sun, the green eyes clearly bemused. She was short and slender, like a pipsqueak.

Both of them really resembled each other. Her mother looked young like a 16 year old Ai.

However, their characters were different. Ai's emotions were always mixed and difficult to differentiate, while her mother could distinguish them clearly, as though there was a switch.

Even at this point, Ai's mother was laughing out loud, seemingly bemused by something.

"Okay, nobody can see you if you're crying now. It's about time now."

"I'm not crying!"

Ai's mother took out a handkerchief, wiping Ai's face. The 12 year old Ai was embarrassed, and wanted to run away, but she realized she was in her 5 year old body, so she ended up having her mother wipe her. The soft handkerchief was throbbed about by the slender fingers, making it really comfortable for her.

“What do you mean the time has come, mama?”

“The most beautiful moment of this village, of course.”



Upon hearing that, Ai thought of her mother's beloved scene.

The setting sun.

The atmosphere had changed completely, and all the lights turned red, the fields showing a golden glow, the crickets chirping.

"Woah..."

The gales blew by, and the wind vane at the highest house of the village danced wildly. Both of them held down their hair in the same manner, marvelling.

The birds roosted as the night hue descended. The villagers hastily returned home. The brightest star flickered.

"So pretty..."

The village was very peaceful, warm, as perfect as a memory.

"You see, you see?"

Her mother beamed, proudly nodding away.

"Don't you find this to be like Heaven?"

"Heaven?"

Just like before, Ai asked.

"Yes. The Dead has to return to Heaven. I heard it's a country of fantasy filled with love and happiness."

Her mother kept smiling as she witnessed the scene beneath her.

"I want to remake this village into a place like Heaven. I want to create a place of hope in this Hellish age."

This village was created by her mother.

Hearing her mother's determined confession, the 5 year old Ai excitedly chimed in, "Ai wants to help too!"

"You want to help?"

"Yes!"

Back then, no matter what she saw her mother do, she wanted to follow suit.

“Thank you, Ai, but this is mama’s job. You have to find out what you want to do.”

“Eh~...”

“Find what you want to do, and if you have any strength left, do help me out. I will say that I’ll really welcome your help then...but never keep on living without knowing nothing. This is mama’s advice to you.”

Her mother raised a finger, looking really impish. These words sounded shrill to the 12 year old Ai, but the 5 year old Ai never realized it, for she said, “Understood! Then what should I do?”

“...You’re really unable to comprehend the words of people.”

Even Ai herself was starting to feel this way recently.

The 5 year old Ai seemed so distant from the 12 year old Ai. The scenery in the dream was like an item drawn in an illustration, becoming distant, about to be washed away.

“Your job now is to eat well and play well, and have everyone dote on you...if you can quickly grow up, there’s nothing I can nitpick about.”

Saying that, the mother lifted Ai.

“Woosh...you’re so heavy.”

“I’ve grown taller.”

“Good work. Keep growing.”

“Yes!”

Mama, I’ve really grown ...

She hoped to tell her mother about this, but the dream was blurred into the sunset red.

●

“I thought about a lot last night.”

The next morning, the duo walked along the edge of a steep, steep cliff. The hill path was once maintained well, but it was no longer a path for any persons to walk.

“...”

Hampnie did not answer, and stopped in his tracks, looking forward down the path.

Ai had no choice but to keep talking,

“I was thinking about Miss Hana.”

“...Ahh...so you’re thinking about that?”

After a long, strange pause, Hampnie started walking forth again.

“I think it’s fine. I was a little taken aback yesterday, but I approve.”

“Well thanks for that.”

“What kind of person is she?”

“Why are you asking this...”

“For future reference.”

“Future reference, huh...but speaking of which, I told you everything I knew already. You remember that well, don’t you? She’s about 30 to 40...”

“Seriously, daddy! That’s not what I’m asking! I’m talking about the inside.”

“Inside?”

Hampnie’s eyes wavered, and he seemed to be clearing the clutter at the depths of his memories.

“...She was a mysterious woman.”

“M-mysterious?”

“Yeah. It’s like, I don’t get what she’s thinking at all, and I don’t know what she lives for.”

“...We’re talking about the person you like, right, daddy?”

“Yeah, there’s no doubt about it.”

Ai sighed, and lifted her head towards Hampnie. She felt this was a strange relationship to begin with.

“It feels like she has never experienced the world herself. She was lively, always laughing out loud, crying out loud, fuming, and laughing after fuming... she’s that sort of person. We spent half a year or so together, and then, she suddenly disappeared.”

Hampnie showed a serene smile on his face as he talked about Hana. Ai realized that he really loved this woman, for it was a fine expression he showed.

“That was over ten years ago, when the world was at its most chaotic. Even if she survived, she’s probably in her 30s, 40s. No, I’m guessing she’s definitely dead ...”

“That long? Have you been looking for her all this time, daddy?”

“Yeah, but actually, I do come by to such a foreign place when I have time. I might look this way, but I’m a busy person after all.”

“I see...I’ll help when I have time then.”

“Thanks for that.”

Ai giggled, and immediately started to think.

“So, what unique characteristics does she have?”

“Oh, well, first of all, she’s a woman, and yet she goes ‘gyahahaha’ when she laughs.”

“Eh?”

“And when she sees something delicious, she doesn’t care about anything else. She’ll even end up fighting others.”

“Th-this ...”

She could hear the jigsaws latching together.

—Guffawing like a villain—quick and gluttonous.

The crucial four pieces to the puzzle were firmly latched together. Ai started to think.

...Since she's a child born to a gravekeeper and a human, and Hampnie's a human, her mother should be a gravekeeper. However, the mother in her memories had nothing resembling that Miss Scar. Suddenly, she recalled Hampnie mentioning the 'malfunctioning gravekeeper'. Yes, surely her mother was a malfunctioning one, and thus able to laugh like a human, sorrow like a human, and love, and harbour hopes.

—A wish to create Heaven.

"What's wrong?"

Ai unwittingly stopped in her tracks.

"I-it's nothing."

While taken aback, Ai answered so as she began to move forward. Even though she could not understand the stinging stare on her back, she did not answer. She was not in the mood to answer, and continued on with a worried, terrified feeling. She did not know how she would answer if she was questioned.

But for some reason, Hampnie kept asking despite seeing that Ai was shaken.

"...Theses are the characteristics. Anything worth taking reference?"

"Erm, yes, sort of."

She answered listlessly, and asked,

"...Daddy, once you do find Miss Hana, what do you intend to do?"

She could not immediately state that Hana was her mother, unable to say that the person he was looking for died five years ago.

"Who knows? Got to look at the situation."

"The situation?"

"Yeah. If she's died, I can't do anything about it. Even if she hasn't, she might have gone crazy, or fallen like others...or maybe she found happiness, and doesn't need me anymore."

Hampnie sounded way too calm, and that left Ai perplexed. She really could not associate 'the beloved person' with 'look at the situation'.

In any case, is it not right to think that loving someone in itself is love?

“Of course, if she’s in a state when she’s imprisoned by some great demon lord, waiting for a warrior to save her, I’ll be willing to. Well, that’s basically it, even though I know I’m not that kind of character.”

“...What if she’s dead?”

“In a certain sense, that’s the easiest outcome.”

“Why!?”

“I’ll just cry, since that’s all I can only do.”

Hampnie did not seem to care as he let the cigarette smoke flutter away.

This man was so nonchalant to everything.

“You’ll cry...?”

“Probably.”

“I see...so you’ll cry ...”

“I won’t cry out.”

“...Is there anything different?”

“The tone’s different. Don’t put me on your level when you can bawl out for an entire year.”

“Uu, sorry.”

Ai quietly berated herself for thinking that Hampnie would cry just because he would think of it. She could not imagine Hampnie crying. She did not want to witness such a scene.

“...So what happens after crying?”

“After...let me think.”

Hampnie seemed really depressed.

“I’ll probably return to the city first, and then I’ll go on a search again.”

“Search? Is there anything you’re looking for besides Miss Hana, daddy?”

“Hm, yeah...I want to know about some things...”

“You’re always looking for something.”

“So I’m probably a ‘lifelong seeker’.”

“Just a forgetful one.”

“Hahaha, now that’s one way of putting it.”

Hampnie ruffled Ai’s hair, and stuffed it into her collar.

“...So what are you looking for?”

“Hm? Ai, you don’t know?”

Hampnie smiled. Upon seeing that smile, Ai felt an ominous feeling for the umpteenth time.

“So, the gravekeeper can’t tell? What is Hampnie Lambert’s wish? You don’t know what’s the one regret of an immortal?”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“Since the dawn of time, all immortals seek the same thing.”

Hampnie suddenly erased his smile.

“I’m looking for a way to die.”

The atmosphere immediately became cold and sticky.

“Die...”

“I’m looking for a way to correct the mistake made by that bastard of a God.”

Only the sounds of the wind and the water could be heard along the cliffside path.

“You want to die ...?”

“Yeah.”

Hampnie bluntly admitted, and pointed to the front,

“Ai, look at this beautiful world.”

Ai followed where he pointed. There were the lights of late spring in the hills, countless flowers waiting to bloom.

The bamboo gress, the carpet of chives, the cluster of Prunus.

“So pretty.”

“Pretty...it’s so barren, and you call it pretty?”

“Barren? What’s barren about this?”

She could not understand Hampnie meant.

“15 years ago, there was a plan to develop this hill. It was going to be mined, and some big building was going to be built for profit sharing. However, Humanity has already been forsaken by this world...and that’s why it ended up so barren.”

Hearing him, it appeared he had dismissed the trees and flowers as a wasteland.

“Ai, can you continue to live on this barren world? I do love Humanity, and if you ask me to be the last human standing on this world...all I can think is, you got to be kidding.”

Hampnie chuckled,

“You probably hate to be alone too, right?”

“But, you say you want to die ...?”

“Oh, so Miss Gravekeeper isn’t happy?”

Ai lifted her head towards his pure white smile unhappily.

“O-of course. You say you want to kill yourself.”

“Hey, think about it properly. Don’t just talk instinctively. Think about the words ‘the last human on this planet’.”

Hampnie knelt down, smacking Ai’s head.

“Imagine, just imagine, visualize it. Are you willing to be the last person standing? Do you want to be dealt the joker hand? There’s no one left on this planet, and if I just keep on living, I’ll always be the last one left.”

Hampnie grabbed Ai's shoulders, not wanting her to run away. He knelt down, meeting her in the eyes as he said these piercing words. It was a devil's bullet imbued with fear.

Only then did Ai start to shiver, and realize how terrifying the words 'the last human on this planet' were, how cruel that visualization was. She recalled how at that moment, she felt fear when she stood alone in the center of the village.

But...

Ai clenched her fists, accepting this fear.

She thought to herself, thinking that she should not be afraid.

"Are you scared?"

For the person before her was far more terrified than she was.

"You're definitely scared, aren't you...daddy."

She touched Hampnie's hands that were grabbing her shoulders, looking towards his hungry, blazing red eyes. His hands were as cold as ice, his eyes betraying a fear Ai had never seen.

Ai stared firmly.

"Daddy."

"...Yeah, I'm scared. I'm really scared."

The depigmented eyes showed a hollow red that was dyed bloody. Hampnie was like a 3 year old boy, terrified for the inevitable Hell.

Ai raised her hands, touching his pale face.

Oozing from deep within her heart was a clear emotion filling her heart. It was gentle, yet not gentle enough, harsh, but not harsh enough. It was simply an emotion with some sweetness through its transparency.

At this point, she felt that she could forgive anyone, and could save anyone.

She could even save the world.

"So that's why you want to become a monster?"

"...Yeah."

“You’re scared of living, and not dying. You’re a mess as a person.”

“...Yeah. Even I’m increasingly feeling that this is a knot I can’t untie.”

“But do be at ease.”

Ai suddenly let go, wielded her shovel again, spunt it once.

“I won’t let you be alone. This is our duty as gravekeepers.”

Ai stood at the edge of the cliff, looking forth to the entire world.

“...I guess I know why there’s a need for gravekeepers. It’s definitely because people prayed to die, and prayed for people to watch over their deaths. Thus, the origin of the gravekeepers, why mama and Miss Scar were born...but these gravekeepers slowly changed, and ended up wanting names and dreams ...”

“What are you saying?”

“Daddy, you won’t become the last human on this planet.”

Ai smiled.

“Because then, there’ll definitely be a gravekeeper waiting by your side, watching you leave, and digging a grave for you.”

“You brat...”

Hampnie watched her smile dejectedly.

“So that’ll end up with you being the last person on this planet, right...”

“Yes.”

“Like hell it is...what are you smiling for...it’s impossible. You have a lifespan, and I don’t think you can take it.”

“But...”

Ai beamed. She wanted to keep smiling for her father.

“I won’t let you feel lonely, daddy.”

Ai smiled again, and this time, Hampnie did not mock her, instead narrowing his eyes at something so seemingly dazzling.

“You...”

He reached his hand out, seeking redemption.

“...No.”

But he did not grab anything, and immediately let go.

“I don’t need it.”

“Don’t need what?”

“I’ll be alone. You don’t have to come along.”

“What are you saying? I’m not going to let this happen.”

“I don’t need you to agree. I can’t allow myself to agree.”

“Please...don’t say such lonely words.”

Ai lifted her green eyes dejectedly. Hampnie’s smile was utterly bitter.

“You’re really a strange one. You’re so scared of me, yet your attitude hasn’t changed...you’re scared, and yet you face it head on. You take negative emotions as they are, just staring at it with your green eyes?”

“What are you saying, daddy?”

“No, it’s nothing. Let’s hurry.”

Right as Hampnie said so—

At this moment—

A few things happened.

First, there was a signal flare coming from the other end. The sun was blotted by the faint clouds, dimming the surroundings. A brutal bloodlust filled the atmosphere.

Then, there were rumbling noises from both front and back.

“Wh-what’s the situation now? Is it Mr Yuri?”

Ai was confused as she held onto the shovel, looking around.

Hampnie did not answer, and merely spat his cigarette out, flipped the front of his coat, and checked his weapons.

“Tch, I messed up.”

“Eh?”

“These guys aren’t with Yuri, they’re hunters. I want to lure them out, but I never expected so many of them.”

“Y-you know who they are?”

“Of course.”

Ai recalled the strange pause Hampnie made when they talked.

“You’re so calm. It’s amazing.”

“I ain’t a monster for nothing. Even with thousands of bullets hitting me, it’s like they didn’t hit me at all. For them though, one shot is all it takes to take each of them out...I don’t know where these idiots come from, but they’re running out of luck here.”

“Oh, that sounds reliable.”

“So, Ai...”

Hampnie smirked. Ai did learn her lesson somewhat, for she was already darting away like a hare before she felt anything ominous.

As far as the hare would run however, it had no chance against a full strength lion. Hampnie’s right foot came flying, brutally kicking Ai down the cliff.

It was said that lions would kick their own cubs down the cliff to test them.

Part II

Ai's body flew to a different place, moving from a transparent, gaseous point to a transparent fluid. The melted snow resulted in a rising, surging current, deforming the semicircular canals completely, and she lost all bearings. With much difficulty she calmed her frantic state of mind, and opened her eyes. She realized that her mouth was wide open, allowing air to flow out, and hurriedly closed it. A branch as large as her body passed by before her eyes, and she took was thrown aside in the same manner, knocking aside the school of fish. The scales of the fish were glittering as she passed them by Her throat went numb.

She could not breathe. She knew this, but she instinctively hoped to gulp in the transparent matter that really resembled air. The pain robbed away her rationality, and her mind got increasingly dumb.

And Ai finally made a mistake.

The water was scalding her like hot water, ripping her windpipe, causing it to bleed. The blood seeped from the nostrils into the eyes.

Even the dying pleas were devoured.

The rivers of spring gushed by.

•

"...Gah! Wah! Ack! Ack! Ah...ahhh!"

Waking up was a terrifying process. Her throat was coughing so much it was like a windshaft. She had just bled from the nose the previous day, and it started bleeding aside. The tears were washed away by the currents, and her eyes were stinging as a result. Her limbs were as cold as ice, completely numb.

Ai kept coughing for a while, spitting out all the liquids in her breathing organs, and started to look around.

“This is ...”

“Stop talking, calm down.”

A bear-like hunk was rubbing her back.

“...You...ack! Saved me? Mr Yuri.”

“Yeah.”

Yuri heaved a sigh, quickly made a fire, and walked away.

Only then was Ai in the mood to look around. She was in a valley surrounded by rocks on both side, a surging current to her side. She did not believe that she managed to survive the rapids.

Her clothes, and even her undergarments were dripping wet. Her backpack was not too far before her feet, completely soaked, and her wet coat was sticking firmly to the rock.

The shovel remained in her hand.

“You never let this go.”

Yuri brought his own belongings over. He tossed a soft coat to Ai, and while topless, dried the clothes. Ai didn't harbour any thoughts as she answered with empty eyes, “This is what's left...of mama.”

“Really...well, if there's a next time, it's advised that you let go of your belongings. You need to be alive before you can use them after all.”

Yuri twisted his shirt, resulting a bucketful of water being squeezed out. Ai shivered as she removed her clothes, hiding beneath the coat as she dried them.

“...What happened?”

“You ask me...you don't remember?”

Ai's memory was really hazy. She pressed her forehead, trying to recall. Back then, there was a howl...they were attacked by bandits ...

She remembered.

Ai grabbed the shovel, and went running forth while wearing only a coat.

“Wait! Where are you going while dressed like this?”

“Please let go! I need to teach that big idiot a lesson this time!”

The red eyed demon was laughing away in her mind. If she had been any more unlucky, she would have died!

“I told you to wait! He saved your life!”

“Huh? Since when is kicking a child down a valley called saving?”

“...Look, I’m not going to speak up for him, but that place became a battlefield later on.”

Saying that, he pointed for Ai to see. It appeared that a long time had passed, but she was not thrown too far away. Ai lifted her head as Yuri told her to. There was no cliff above her.

“...Huh?”

The entire road had fallen to the bottom of the valley. Even the currents were colored like dirt. Her nose finally regained functionality, and she had a whiff of gunpowder.

“...That’s the enemy trap daddy spoke of?”

“No, that’s his signature suicidal attack.”

Ai looked up in bewilderment. **This side** was certainly a lot safer than **that side**.

“...He’s always going overboard.”

“Say it isn’t so.”

Yuri cursed. However, he was showing a similar look to Ai. While bemoaning that it was troublesome, he did not really think so.

“...You’re really a good person.”

“Hm? Why mention this out of a sudden?”

“I’ll write off the last time you pointed the gun at me.”

Upon hearing that, Yuri scratched his head awkwardly, “Sorry...”

“So, what happened to daddy—Hampnie? Did he run away after seeing you,

Mr Yuri?”

“No...this is the problem. It’s just too weird...”

Yuri frowned, forming wrinkles on his forehead.

“After the explosion happened on the cliff, the gunfight continued. Then, there was a volley of fire, followed by silence.”

“? What do you mean?”

“Looking at how Hampnie normally wins when going one on many, the gunfire should quiet down in phases, like how people slowly die out...but this time, it’s a volley of fire, followed by silence. And...”

Yuri took out a rubber stick with a cross shaped scar.

“What is this?”

“Rubber bullets, obviously. It’s used for riot suppression.”

Saying that, he scented at the air with his high nose.

“I know this gunpowder smell, and the smell of compressed air in an airgun. I’m guessing that the bandits preparing such toys aren’t normal.”

No matter how severe Hampnie ‘s wounds were, once he died, he would recover completely.

In other words, the only way to beat Hampnie was to capture him alive, and these tools were meant to facilitate that.

Ai felt cold sweat.

“Was he...captured...?”

“Likely.”

“That...”

That terrifying Hampnie was captured?

“...Hard to imagine that.”

“I feel the same...that’s some feat to accomplish if he wasn’t planning to be captured.”

Ai hurriedly opened her backpack, and prepared a change of undergarments.

“We can’t keep wasting time now! We have to hurry and save him!”

“Save...Hampnie?”

Yuri sounded incredulous.

“What do you mean?”

“No...think about it. he’s a monster. People will ask him for help, and not the other way around. He should be able to deal with this himself. Even if we do help him out, he’ll just say that we’re busybodies.”

Saying that, Yuri sneered at himself, and Ai was still seething as she clenched at her underwear.

“Please don’t be sure of what kind of person he is! He’s so scared of loneliness, and if we don’t save him, he’ll be all the more lonely. Even he thinks that he’s a monster now...he’s stupid!”

Yuri stared at Ai. Her eyes were raging, crumpling the underwear in her hand.



“...Now that’s shocking. Someone actually treats him as human.”

“Of course! If you say he’s a monster again, I’ll beat your snot out! Get it!?”

Ai raised her hand holding her undergarments.

“I get it, I get it. I won’t say anymore ...”

Yuri raised his hands to surrender. Ai snorted in satisfaction, and finally put on her undergarment. It was wringed dry.

“Yuri Sakuma Dmitriyevich.”

His rock like right hand was reached out before Ai.

“I respect your convictions.”

“...I’m Ai.”

She held it tentatively, and her hand was shaken up and down, causing her to retract it immediately.

“Ai. Nice name.”

This man’s so handsome.

Ai remembered that she had just accidentally shook hands using her hand holding her undergarments, and worried if it was fine.

“...I saw what happened to your village. I heard about all your bitterness and that ‘daddy’ you speak of. I’m willing to help.”

“You...know the significance of ‘that incident’?”

“I guess I do, but...”

“Understood. Please don’t say anything. This is my own problem.”

“...Did you figure out something?”

“...Who knows? I don’t know how much I figured out or not, but I have a feeling..”

“Feeling?”

“Yes, I do think daddy’s right. I’ll know about everything soon...”

“Is there any basis to you saying this?”

“Nothing, it’s just instinct.”

Ai spun her shovel around.

“But my instincts are pretty sharp, you know? Recently, whenever I have bad feelings, my accuracy is abnormally high...”

“...Looks that way.”

Yuri sneered.

“Alright! Let’s go. Mr Yuri, please lead the way.”

“Hm, yeah, about this ...”

“What is it?”

Suddenly, Ai remembered that Yuri intended to kill Hampnie, and he was given the slip after they promised to have a showdown. Perhaps he was yearning to see his sworn enemy be caught in a fix.

“...You don’t want to save him? You really do hate him, don’t you...?”

“No, that’s not it. I hate to say it, but he’s right...I don’t want to admit it...but right now, I really can’t shoot him...”

Yuri put a hand on his face.

“That bastard’s still a friend of mine.”

The blue-eyed beast was saying that Hampnie was despicable.

“Then...”

“Well, I’m worried about something a little more basic.”

Yuri looked afar, saying with a grim look.

“Actually, I didn’t see where they took him.”

“You’re useless!”

Ai yelled.

“What’s the situation! Aren’t you here to give chase after daddy!”

“Right now...I can't bring myself to shoot him.”

“You're so uncool! This isn't an issue about emotions, but ability, right?”

“Like, what can I do!? You were washed down the river to me.”

“Well, thanks for that...and that's why you're just 'acting according to priority'.”

“Ugh, you're right on the mark there.”

“This isn't important! The time now is ...”

Ai took out the watch that was always kept away. The time shown left her in utter disbelief.

“I passed out for two hours?”

“Yeah. You were still in the water just now. You drifted on a log at such a close place, and because of this, I found you much later, so I can't tell if you're lucky or not.”

Ai shivered. She did crawl out from the depths of death. Thus, she decided to kick Hampnie first.

“Anyway, let's hurry back. There's many of time, and it's easy to find them. I'm a hunter after all.”

Given how he showed up, it appeared he really was capable.

“But...we have a hurry.”

He was a captive of the Undead. These words had her imagining a terrifying visual.

“...Yes. We have to hurry.”

Without saying anything more, Yuri put on his clothes.

“Oh?”

At this moment ...

“This is a strange place we are meeting at, Miss Ai.”

A perfect voice could be heard.

“Miss Scar!”

“Yes, good afternoon. No, perhaps I should say, good evening?”

This person was holding a glittering silver shovel, showing a perfect smile.

The gravekeeper with the scar on her face was standing there.

Part III

(Gyyyyyyaa!)

Hampnie woke up due to a scream.

“Ah, you woke up?”

With his head still groggy, he looked around. It appeared to be a hut on the hills. There were seven others with him.

There was nothing common among the seven, whether it was their age, race, and gender. Only the scent lingering in the room, along with their faces, left him really disgusted.

He could not figure out who screamed.

“Hey~ you sleepyhead? Look at me.”

He ignored the man before him, so that he could affirm his situation.

“Hey hey, look at me. Call my name sweetly...”

“Shut up, who are you?”

“Yay! I win!”

Once he said that, Hampnie was shot right through the eyes.

“That’s a new record! Mission cleared! Alright you guys, I win! Hand it over!”

The man returned the handgun, and took the dagger and gemstones that were handed over.

Hampnie immediately revived, yelling,

“...Who are you guys!?”

“That’s weird. We never said our names?”

“I didn’t hear that!”

Hampnie was agitated, while the man frivolously noted.

“No no no, we said it, Hampnie Lambert. We heard that if you die under extreme mental duress, you’ll lose your memories, right?”

“You guys, where did you...”

He wanted to ask where did they heard it from, but once he saw the glee before him, he realized.

“From where...here, through experiment and results. Ahh, how amazing.”

“—You scumbags!”

“Actually, we were all taking turns to kill you. Whoever killed your mind and caused you the longest time to recover is the winner. So I win! So I’m taking the prize here!”

The man knelt down happily, digging out Hampnie’s left eye.

“Gyyyyyyaa!”

Hampnie realized that the scream came from him.

“So pretty.”

The man toyed with the left eye in his hand.

“A nice toy you are. Too bad that the moment you die, even a drop of blood will vanish, and you’ll recover like before. That’s why there’s no way for you to just repair a part. Too bad.”

He sighed with melancholy.

“But you can’t grow fat thanks to that.”

Hampnie gulped.

“You shitty bastards!!!!”

“Enough, stop being so angry, will ya? “

“Scumbags! Scumbags! Scumbags!”

He just so happened to be captured by the worst of them. A torture or two would not cause Hampnie to succumb, and the reset of his memories after his mind was killed off would not happen so easily. However, he did not remember

anything that happened after he was brought to this hut!

With his remaining right eye, he looked back at himself. He thought they had changed his tattered clothes for him, but on a closer look, he realized that no, he was dressed in his usual travelling clothes. He did not know what they did to him. His shirt, pants, belt and even coat were like minced meat.

“I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!”

“Aha, now here’s some new insult! That’s how it should be.”

“Who are you!? What do you want!?”

“Hm? You forgot that too?”

The man sneered, and the woman watching from behind said,

“Hiko, you never explained.”

“Eh? Is that so?”

“Yes boss. You were like a brat, just going ‘let’s lynch him’ when we hurried to this hut ...”

“Ahahah, shut up, you idiot.”

The man fired, hitting the shorty seated at the beam of the cabin, who then fell to the ground.

Everyone’s reaction was to laugh maniacally, as though a funny joke was made.

Hampnie gnashed his teeth, and spat with some venom.

“You rotten Dead!”

Everyone suddenly stopped laughing, before they giggled.

“Hmph. Of course you’re realize...how about this?”

“Shut up, you rotten brains! You’re the worst of the worst of the Dead!”

“You’re right. Sorry for cutting away at you without chatting. How about a

halftime break? So, everyone agree? Enough fun here?”

The man turned around, asking for everyone’s agreement.

“What’s there to be unhappy about? You’re the one who played the most, boss! More like you’re a quick shooter—”

“Ahahah, sorry, sorry.”

The man who was shot down hopped up, and was again shot.

Laughter filled the entire hut.

“...A loss of self-restraint, a simplification of desires, and the aggressive instinct of the ‘reptilian complex’ took over. This is the classic thought process of people who the urge to kill after they die...”

“But there ain’t a lot of us cool guys here, you know?”

The man twirled his gun, trying to act cool.

“So, let’s do this again, Hampnie Lambert. I’m Hikotsu, and everyone calls me Hiko, I hope you’ll call me that.”

The man’s eyes were bloody red, his hair was bleached white, his lanky limbs white like wax.

“So Hampnie, can you tell what’s my dressup is about? I’m trying to imitate you. I’m a big fan of yours. Those eyes! Those muscles! That voice! That immortal body! That cruelty!...you’re so wonderful.”

Hiko narrowed his eyes in ecstasy.

“It’s the first time I’m trying to become someone else, but it’s really difficult trying to become you. I can change my appearance in many ways, but that immortality is a difficult thing. So...”

“So you might as well die and become a monster?”

Hiko was cut off, and he looked displeased by this.

“...Well, sort of. That’s how it is. We settled your immortality through death. Well, we wanted to ask the ‘witch’ for help, but there’s no time.”

“Hmph, you want the shitty hag to clean up after your mess? Fool...and so are

the others, I guess.”

Hampnie scanned the hut.

One was rubbing adhesives onto his head like a gel, one was spraying perfume everyone, one ignored the gaping wound in the chest, one took a preservative as a drink, one who just got shot, and got up immediately, and another one went about delivering friendly fires.

None of the seven were the living.

The thick scent of perfume was mixed with the rotten stench, resulting in a flower grown in Hell.

“They agree with me. Such nice companions.”

“...They’re mad.”

“Well, part of the reason is that without doing this, we can’t catch you...you’re really amazing. Half of the guys we got ended up wiped out by you, and can’t say anything you. You know how to use your immortality. That reputation of yours is well deserved, Hampnie Lambert.”

“It seems you want to **praise yourself**, but you guys are fools, selling your lives away just to capture a fool like me.”

“Of course not. You can’t be belittling yourself, since you’re so wonderful. Ah, you hate people praising your appearance? Oh my, did I make you angry because I talked about this? Well sorry then.”

“Going at your own pace...can’t you listen to others for once?”

“What’s most wonderful about you is your mentality.”

Hiko said.

“Which one comes first? The chicken or the egg? Did a curse create a miracle that is you, or that you brought the curse upon you...well, I don’t understand, but that mentality of yours is amazing! Silently judging the dead, killing for your dark sense of justice, kill, kill kill. Yup~ that’s awesome.”

“So a degradation of your self-insert tendencies...looks like you added a lot more stuff there.”

“Don’t be humble. I know everything about you, down to the little bit.”

Like a lover, Hiko leaned towards the one he idolized.

“Hampnie Hambert, you want to die. Am I right?”

“...”

Hampnie didn’t answer.

“I know. I know your ambition. You want to kill yourself too, and take back the death God stole from you, right?”

“...”

Hiko seemed to have taken silence as consent.

“In that case! I’ll kill you!”

“...Can you kill me?”

“Yup, I’ll fulfil your wish!”

“What makes you think so? Any proof you can do it?”

Hiko got increasingly excited, while Hampnie continued to converse calmly.

“None, but I’ve always been like this since young, that if I want to, I can do it. I guess I should be able to, right?”

“So all subjectiveness is gone, and you puffed yourself up...you don’t have this ability.”

Hampnie sighed hard.

“Come on, let’s have a few more rounds now.”

Hiko was holding lots of tools in his hands.

A knife, stick, gun, scissors, oil, water, rope, cloth, sand, needle, taser, gunpowder, pen, lens, lever, pulley, planing knife, sickle, mouth, trowel, beetles...

He was grinning like a child who was holding a trove of candy “...These things can’t kill me.”

“Don’t say that. Let’s try it out first, shall we?”

“You tried...enough.”

Hampnie watched the tools with boredom. Clearly, his words of sincerity did not reach Hiko.

“Ah, is that so? But, let’s try this again...”

“You and your rotten brain...also, you’re wrong to begin with. My wish isn’t to ‘just die’.”

“Eh?”

Hiko was elated, only to be dumbfounded once he heard this. The overly bubbly expression vanished completely, as though he was a completely different person.

From the many weapons he had, he drew a knife.

“...What’s going on? Isn’t your utmost goal to die? You’re lying when you say you want to die? You’re lying? You lied to me? Are you lying? You lying? You lying? You lying? What’s the lie?”

“Such a strong stereotype, sure comes from the aggressive to protect yourself ...”

“Enough! With! This Nonsense!”

For every yell he made, he hacked once. Hampnie was soon hacked to a pulp.

“Answer me!”

While bleeding all over, Hampnie answered,

“I wasn’t...lying.”

These words changed Hiko’s attitude completely.

“What...that wasn’t a lie? Great, stop scaring me, okay? Ah, sorry for the many stabs.”

“Hiko, my wish isn’t that simple.”

“...What?”

“I don’t just want to die. I want to die ‘happy’ ...”

Hiko tilted his head, pressing the blade at Hampnie’s neck.

“Hampnie, what are you saying? Come on, don’t let me down.”

Hampnie laughed,

“...I never said this to anyone, but I think I should make this clear...I say, Hiko
...”

“Don’t say it!”

“I want to die happy.”

The white skin was stained with blood, and the dying man narrated his dream, “I saw lots of people die, and I hope for someone to take care of me when I die...I don’t care where it is...I just want my friends...my wife, my children...any descendents to cry for me...to mourn for me. That’s the lingering regret I want... before I die...that’s all.”

The air became frigid, the hut as cold as the freezer of a butcher.

Hiko shivered.

“H-Hampnie...is this...your wish?”

“Right.”

“You want...such an ordinary, boring death?”

“Boring? Coming from you? ...Nobody on this world can fulfil my wish.”

On this world where everything had ended, everyone had given up on this dream. Without any children to be born, there were no descendents to speak of.

Despite so, Hampnie lifted his head proudly, boldly, undaunted by the naysayers.

“My wish is to live happily, and to die happily!”

“No...how’s that, possible...how...is it...possible...”

The knife fell from Hiko’s hands, and he grabbed his own hair.

“You’re betraying me now!? First you become the most important existence

to me, and now you're betraying me!?"

Hampnie tersely responded,

"Who cares about you, you idiot?"

"Gyyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!"

Hiko shrieked, tearing his hair out, rubbed aside his contacts, nearly digging out his eyeball as a result, and scratched at his white skin.

Then, he showed a change of attitude again.

"Whatever, you're just our toy after all."

Hiko regained his calm, and was so calm, what happened before seemed like a mere joke. Then, he pointed the handgun on Hampnie.

"You lack concentration...is your fanaticism and conviction just a fleeting illusion? Such a pitiful fellow you are."

"Whatever you say."

"...Okay, you guys are doomed anyway."

"Doomed? Why? We still have many dreams."

"Looks like your predictive ability has failed...this country has no capability to hold all you guys. Given how your brains have rotted, there's no way you could have any tickets for the 'North'. Those mangled bodies of yours will rot and become limp. Until then..."

Hampnie showed a cruel smile confident of victory.

"Don't think I'll just hand over you guys to the gravekeeper."

"Ahahahahaha! What a pity! You thought we never thought about it?"

"Oh really?"

Hampnie seemed bemused.

"You dare the word 'think' with your rotten brains? Interesting."

"Ehhh, heheheh, actually, it's nearby."

"What place is near?"

“Hehehe, you wanna know? Sure you know?”

“...Spill the beans already. I’m dying ...”

Hiko cackled away, spreading his arms wide,

“Opposite this hill is a ‘Heaven’!”

Hampnie shot him a look of pity.

“I pity you... the thing that rotted first inside you is your brain ...”

“Not at all! Heaven is just a description! There really is one opposite...I hear there’s a land of the Dead with no pain or prejudice. A really wonderful place ...”

Hiko was elated, clapping his hands together.

“Hmph...so you mean that place accepts monsters like you too? So that’s your idea...rotten brains, even your ideas are rotten.”

“Huh, what? You envy us? Isn’t it wonderful? Amazing? Like a dream...that’s definitely a nice place ...”

“Not really.”

“Eh?? What? What’s going on? You know where it is?”

“Yes.”

Hiko asked, and Hampnie retorted.

“That place got wrecked by me.”

There was dead silence in the air.

“...Hey.”

Hiko stumbled forward, and leaned towards Hampnie

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey hey hey, hey hey hey hey hey hey, hey! How can you do such a thing!!!!”

“Ahahaha! Ahahahahahahaha! Ahahahahahahahahahahaha!”

“Stop laughing—!”

The empty eye socket was jammed in with a gun, but Hampnie kept laughing.

“Ahahahahaha!! So the remaining brains of yours don’t understand what’s going on!? Amazing! Now taste the despair!”

“Shut up!”

He was punched, kicked at, beaten, stabbed, scratched, bent, hammer, burnt, flushed, scooped, and lynched.

But Hampnie kept laughing.

“Ahh! Enough! I had enough!”

Though mad, Hiko grabbed the gun in a trained manner, his gun pointed at Hampnie’s remaining right eye.

“I’ll kill you! As many times as I can!”

“Keep killing me, but the one standing at the end will be me, so keep barking a few times while you can.”

Both sides gave smirks of victory, the black eyes and red eye glare at each other with malice.

A bloodbath was about to begin. The only plan was to annihilate each other. Clearly, a bloodbath was happening.

And the first knife was about to be raised...

Suddenly, the door was opened.

“Greetings , I have pursued you for a long time.”

A perfect speaking voice was heard.

“I am the gravekeeper Scar, here to bury you.”

Gravekeeper! Upon hearing that, the Dead raised their guns in unison.

“Wait, Miss Scar! Why are you charging in immediately?”

Then, another voice interrupted, cutting both of them.

“Didn’t Mr Yuri say to observe the situation!?”

“We gravekeepers prioritize speed, no matter whether humans are inconvenienced, even if they are dead or alive.”

The one talking leaned out through the gap at the gap, tugging at Scar's shirt.

“Enough, please stop!”

“Understood.”

Scar immediately stopped.

“Eh? Th-that’s weird. You’re willing to stop?”

“You are an individual ranked higher than me. Surely I should abide.”

“O-oh, I see...I’m not really sure what’s going on, but first ...”

“Ai!”

Hampnie yelled. The confident expression he had vanished in an instant.

“Wah! D-daddy! What happened to you ...”

“This isn’t important! Why are you here!?”

“P-please don’t be angry. I hurried here ...”

“This isn’t the problem! Why did you come?”

These words echoed everyone’s sentiments. Hampnie was dumbfounded, the Dead gave looks at each other, and Hiko smirked, saying, “How interesting.”

He stopped his subordinates from acting wildly.

Ai stood in the middle, smiling away, saying,

“I’m here to save you, of course!”

“You idiot!”

“You’re calling me an idiot!? I’m the one coming to save you here!”

“That’s my line! A monster likes his chances of winning! You’re a lot weaker than me, and you want to save me? Stop being cocky!”

“What logic is that? You don’t want others to save you!? Are you going to keep saying that you’re a monster, and really become one?”

“Shut up. We’re not blood related. Stop butting in!”

“I would have abandoned you if we aren’t blood related!”

“Then just scram! I got nothing to do with you!”

Ai’s rationality snapped. She abandoned all restraint as she spoke up.

“...Of course you do!”

“Huh?”

“I said we’re related!”

Her green eyes were showing, the silver shovel was glittering.

“I’m Ai, the daughter of Hampnie Hambert and the original gravekeeper.”

“...So what?”

“Mama’s...pretty, and children, and a glutton...always going gyahaha when she laughs.”

“...So...what?”

Hampnie had mentioned these before, but Ai was not done,

“She can’t whistle...can’t cook, eats a lot, has nimble hands, but can’t tie her shoelaces. She cleans up a lot, uses weird language, sneezes really loudly, hates cigarettes and perfume, love sweets...she loves to eat...and eat ...”

Thump.

Hampnie’s heart faltered. The past scenes were recollected with the face before him.

“And she...loved you.”

She was as observant as an adult, and as innocent as a child. Whenever he shot at the dead, she would be angry. She would cry for others, dreamed of building a Heaven...and she loved him.

Her face remained before him.

“You’re my...daughter?”

—Brown hair, black eyes, a perfect face, of similar height to me, small; breasts.

When he said this, he had thought of her brown hair as blond, and black as green, and found their faces to be shockingly similar. Since she was a gravekeeper, he understood why she hid her face.



He could see a smiling afterimage.

"I told you...so many times already ..."

Ai frowned, saying this awkwardly.

"I say, you two. Nice chat you have, sorry for interrupting."

At this moment, Hiko interrupted. Ai stood before Hampnie, facing Hiko directly.

"...You're the mastermind?"

With blazing eyes, Ai looked back and forth between him and the dying Hampnie.

"How cruel..."

"Hm, you're angry just because of this? Even if he dies, it's fine. Does it matter? Enough with that. Nice to meet you, Missy. The name's Hiko ."

"...The name's Ai."

"So, little Ai? Speaking of which, we just heard what you said ..."

Hiko gave an innocent smile.

"What are you? Born to a gravekeeper and a human? Hampnie's daughter? So you're born in these 15 years? What is this! This is so special! Amazing!"

"Th-thank you ..."

Ai heard the praise, and saw the outstretched hand, so she shook hands with Hiko.

"Sorta..."

With the hand he just shook with, Hiko pointed a gun at Ai, "I wonder if Hampnie will be delighted to see little Ai tortured?"

Ai saw the gun pointed towards her face, and sighed. She had been encountering such situations recently.

"Stop it, all of you! Scar, do something!"

"You have no right to order me."

“Shut up! Hampnie.”

“Hey! Brat! If you dare do anything funny, you beloved daddy will really suffer here!”

“Seriously, can’t you act a little gentlemanly...”

There was a ruckus in the room, and everyone present was chatting away, shouting away.

Ai stood in the middle, watching everything. She was recognizing every bit of information she knew of, including Hampnie’s injuries, the scars left on the bandits, gunpowder, rotten water.

And the scent of perfume used to mask the old stench of people.

“You’re filthy.”

Ai statedly adamantly.

There was instant silence in the hut, followed by laughter. Everyone was laughing away, their faces basically saying, isn’t this obvious. Hiko was the only one looking like he was a little hurt.

“We’re all rotten.”

“What can we do about it? We’re all dead! What now? You scared, little girl?”

While everyone was mocking her, Ai closed her eyes. She was fully convinced.

She understood everything, what Hampnie’s justice meant, what evil everyone did, the secret behind the birth of the village, and Ai’s *raison d’être* as a gravekeeper.

She knew the significance of Hampnie leaving her as the only one alive, the reason for Yoki apologizing to her every night, her mother’s wishes to rebuild Heaven, and the villagers hoping to groom her into an indecent gravekeeper.

Her village was...

“...Necropolis...”

The Heaven of blissfulness for the Dead.

She felt that Yoki, Hampnie, Scar and Yuri were 'pretty', for they were 'normal', not that they were really pretty.

She was the abnormal one, for being accustomed to the faulty limbs, white rotten eyes, unhealable wounds, and corroded skins of the villagers. The musky scent she liked was just the rotten stench of the corpses.

Initially, it all went well. When her mother was still alive, it was truly a Heaven.

But when the malfunctioning gravekeeper died, the village was engulfed in a frenzy.

The people, unwilling to abandon Heaven, fooled a child who just lost her mother to death, educated her to their benefit, and had her wield the shovel. It was how they were able to evade the interference of the other gravekeepers, and scraped by. They had Yoki apologize to her, and overly doted on their gravekeeper.

It was a matter of time until they faltered.

Finally, the village was wiped out by Hampnie Lambert. The Dead should die, and with his sense of justice, he terminated the village.

And at this point, she alone stood here.

"So you finally figured out...?"

Hampnie whispered.

"It's not right for me to say this...I hope you won't hate them too much over this."

"Of-of course...they were left with no choice."

Ai wiped her tears off.

She kept thinking. Was there no other way out? Could everyone not have told this to her, and have her follow the path of her mother?

But people are timid, and would never dare to pick this path.

They would not choose this path, no matter what.

Just as she did not want them to reveal everything.

None of them dared to reveal everything.

This fact left Ai despondent, sympathetic, and she even cried over it.

But even so ...

She wiped her tears away, for she had a path to continue.

“...Okay, everyone, I’m a gravekeeper, but I’m still a human, so I’m not going to bury you as what I’m supposed to do. If you let daddy go and swear not to continue with your misdeeds, I can let you go ...”

Pew a sound blew by, and hot hair grazed Ai’s ear. The enemy did not mishit on purpose, and it was Ai who dodged the bullet that was aimed right at her ear with minimal movements.

“So, little Ai, you think you’re in a position to demand from us?”

“...So you’re not going to listen to me?”

Ai gripped the shovel firmly.

“Really. To be honest, I was happy to be rejected by you. You went overboard on daddy, and I don’t think I can forgive you for this...no, I’ll stop lying to myself. Even if you say you’ll change for the better, I won’t believe you...”

“Really? Sorry? Then, what are you going to do?”

The gun remained locked on.

“Ai, stop it! Don’t taunt them. You psycho! Fight me if you dare!”

With his mouth, the only free thing he had left, Hampnie tried to divert attention, but nobody was baited.

Hiko, and even Ai did not hear his please. The mockery and rage were clashing, cutting away all retreat paths.

“At the very least, I’ll bring you eternal rest.”

“Leave your bedtalk for your death.”

“Farewell then.”

“Time to make you part of me.”

Before Hampnie could yell, a gunshot echoed. It happened before everyone could take action, and following that, some time passed.

“This!”

The handgun was shot out of Hiko’s hand. The gunshot came from outside the hut.

“Yuri!? Ai, run away now!”

Ai was so calm, she had the time to think that it was atypical for Hampnie to be so worried. Upon hearing him tell her to run, she had a thought. Everyone present was taken aback by the sudden sniper, not knowing what to do.

If she was alone to begin with, Ai could have escaped on her own. She agreed. However, “Haahh!!”

Clank~!

“What are you doing!?”

But Ai showed no intention of running away, and even roared, using the shovel to knock out Hiko, who intended to grab the gun.

“Run, you idiot! You’re so weak!”

“That won’t do. I have to save you first, daddy!”

The Dead were done spacing out. The remaining six ignored the fact that their leader was no longer present as they readied themselves for battle. The shorty and a woman were closing in from blind spots unhittable from the outside, while the others got into firing angles where they would not hit their allies.

Thus, Ai said,

“Miss Scar.”

“Please be the backup.”

You idiot! Hampnie was about to berate Ai, but the two had already closed in. The woman was attacking with punches, while the short one was reaching out for her collar. Both of them tried to capture her, but it seemed they intended to break a rib or two while capturing her.

The mantis chop and the octopus feelers were reading her movements, trying

to win with one decisive strike.

Ai's reaction in turn was—

“Ha!”

To simply swing the shovel horizontally.

Two of the Dead went flying like twigs.

“Huh?”

Every person in the room blurted out.

“Ai, you...”

Hampnie spoke up for everyone,

“You're pretty capable.”

Truly, there was the blood of a gravekeeper flowing within her petite body.

“You're the one who's ridiculously strong!”

Ai was somewhat seething as she replied.

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The battle kept going. The remaining four hid in the storage of the hut, firing rounds as they tried to fend off the two gravekeepers.

But this little skirmish was basically over.

Hampnie watched this scene with his right eye, lazily sinking into his own thought.

...I never thought I would meet my daughter while looking for my lover ...

This daughter was not hiding behind the entrance. She was throwing rocks and twigs along with Scar. They flew by him like a mesmerizing fastball.

He yawned, his emotions somewhat dulled. There was an excessive loss of blood, and so he knew, from his usual thoughts, that he was about to die.

It had been a while since he had the urge not to die. He felt that since Ai was so desperate to save him, it would be sacrilege for him to die off like this. Once he had such a thought, he gained some strength to continue living on, and

opened his eyes.

Ai was at the entrance, busy with the battle. However, her worried eyes remained on Hampnie.

...What was with that face? Was it not the face of a family member witnessing a dead person for the last time...?

He had nothing to do, and he felt like smoking. However, his shirt was reduced to torn fabric, and he had no pockets to speak of, let alone cigarettes. His hands were tied, and this was not the time for him to look for a smoke. At the very least, Hampnie knew how to read the mood.

Right when he was wondering what to do, he turned his eyes to the side, and what luck he had! There was a crumpled cigarette dropped at the side of the wall, miraculously. He twisted his body about, reaching his leg out, ignoring the deathmatch by his side as he danced about like a moth. In the process, he was hit by a few stray shots, but he did not mind.

Finally, he picked it up with his mind, took a puff, and realized something was amiss.

There was no fire.

Suddenly, he felt that nothing mattered. He did not know whether the hut would ignite into flames, but the ending surely would not be pretty.

Time passed...and his vision got dark. He was running out of blood. His heart was pounding wildly, but it was pointless.

...Damn it, I want a smoke...

It was a lingering regret.

The battle was going to end, but right when the coast seemed to be clear for the enemy camp, there were bullets flying in. Yuri had take a detour forward, shooting from a different direction. Truly, he was experienced in combat.

...But I never thought I'll have a daughter...that Hana, no, is her real name Alfa? Always the wild one. She left on her own, and died ...

His thoughts lost all focus. The situation seemed really bad.

He tried to buck up, and inhaled at the unlit cigarette.

And then, he recalled that she always hated cigarettes.

Suddenly, he teared up, not because of sadness, but that his body was seemingly simply reacting according to a promise. This is troublesome. He could not appear before Ai in this manner, for she too would cry.

...But this just feels so surreal. He was not made for this. He was not a good father...

Yet Ai just kept calling him daddy.

...He carried her ...

He recalled the moment when he carried her on his back.

...If that made her happy, he could...carry her again...

He felt he was not made for this, yet thinking about this made him happy.

Soon after, the battle ended like an extinguished flame. Ai was the first to run over.

“Daddy!”

...Ehhh, stop crying, it’s annoying. How many times have I seen this scene, I wonder ...

But Ai remained teary as she tried to bandage Hampnie.

...It’s more practical to kill me off here...goodness...

“...Don’t cry ...”

“Daddy!”

Once Hampnie spoke, Ai immediately broke into a smile.

“...Goodness, you brat. Stop causing me trouble here, okay ...”

“But, you’re bleeding so much...”

“...I’ll die...have a nap, and I’ll be fine...stop panicking already...”

“But...”

“...I beg of you...just let me...sleep a bit...”

Ai did not oblige, shaking her head with tears in her eyes.

...Kids really are annoying...

So he thought as he closed his eyes...at this moment, he recalled something he had to say before he died.

“Ai...”

“Yes! What is it?”

“...I never told you my name...not even your mother knows this.”

With his last ounce of strength, he inhaled, saying,

“...My name is Kizuna...Kizuna Astin, so you’re Ai Astin.”

“Ai Astin.”

“...Nice name.”

...That’s really a name she would have given...

So he thought, and he suddenly arrived at his limit. His vision got dark, his voice seemed distant, and his consciousness splintered...damn it, I still have lots of things to say...

He had lots of things he wanted to tell Ai, to ask, and wanted to do for her. However, he felt tired thinking about that...ahh, it’s been a while since I felt this way...

He kept watching Ai’s moist eyes until the very end.

...Sure feels like the first time I died...

The sad words kept lingering at his ears.

...I really don’t want to die.

His thoughts were snapped, vanishing completely.

And so...

He lost his wife...

His daughter cried for him...

With his friend and a gravekeeper watching on...filled with some lingering

regrets...

Hampnie Hambert died.

Part IV

On the evening two days later, Hampnie woke up, and practically fulfilled all the wishes Ai had for him. He carried her, had her sit on his shoulders, and patted her head.

Ai was having fun, and kept on giving new requests. She got scolded at times for being too greedy, but even that left her elated.

She was thrilled to be scolded.

Scar smiled as she watched on, while Yuri quietly observed.

The group slowly returned to the road. Hampnie talked a lot, and Ai talked a lot. With the setting sun behind them, they passed the hills, strolling beneath the full moon.

Ai kept smiling away as she rode upon Hampnie's shoulders. It was a dream-like night.

They arrived at the village, so depressingly quickly, and walked towards the graveyard.

The graves beneath the moon appeared bigger than they were in the day. The moment of departure arrived in the blink of an eye.

Ai asked for everything selfish she could have asked for, except for the one earnest desire she had. She knew that even if she did say so, it would have left him perturbed.

Hampnie quietly realized her intentions, and apologized.

Ai smiled, playing dumb. She kept smiling.

Even until Hampnie finally laid down.

She felt that she should force a smile when she dug the dirt out with the shovel. She couldn't remember if she was smiling when the first bits of dirt was

tossed upon Hampnie.

“Uu...”

She was bawling by the time Hampnie closed his eyes.

“Waahh, aahhhh, ahhhh— — — — —...”

She moved the dirt with her shovel, burying the dead, not leaving a single opening.

The work was done amidst tears.

Ai bawled as she waved the shovel. Her face was wrinkled due to the crying as she tossed the dirt into the grave, being all emotional as she dug at the ground.

The right eye, the only thing left of Hampnie, never opened again, and the scarred skin was gradually seeping into the ground.

The miracle that allowed Hampnie to live till this day vanished miraculously at this moment.

After the brief, stiff moment of slumber that occurred after death, the dead will get up, realize his self. For he, who loved humans more than anyone else, was applicable to his own justice of hating the dead.

But for his daughter, he was willing to show his ugly side.

Ai knew how big of an exception it was to Kizuna Astin. Thus, she never said her biggest wish.

She couldn't say that she wanted him to stay by her side.

She decided it was for the best, so she smiled.

However, that was the only point when she hoped to cry a little.

“Uuuu, waahhh—! Wahhhhhh, waaaaa, uuuuu.”



Scar, Yuri and the moon watched her without saying a word, mourning the being that departed this world for eternity.

And so, the grave was finished. The one remaining pit was filled.

The grave was right beside her mother's.

Ai wiped off her tears and snot openly, lifted the shovel, and moved aside for Yuri.

"...Is this fine?"

"Yes...please."

She was done crying, done being sad.

Yuri stood before the grave, offering a little flower of the Spring, and lit a crumpled cigarette, placing it at the grave.

"Here lies one born as a human, lived as a human, and died as a human."

Scar muttered a prayer. The other two remained silent. The stars flickered in the hazy purple sky, the cigarette smoke rising towards there.

The burial ended.

"What are you...going to do from now on?"

After a long silence, Yuri asked. The moon got weaker, and the surrounding mist brightened.

The sun slowly rose in the East, glowing away. Ai wiped her face, raised her shovel, and the silver head reflected the sunrise brightly.

"I'm a gravekeeper...no"

Her mother saved the dead, creating Heaven.

Her father saved the living, separating them from Hell.

"I want to be a gravekeeper!"

Ai chose to inherit their ambition on her own volition, and carve out a new path for herself.

"People can be kind or evil, but no matter whether they're living or dead, I want to keep taking care of them."

It was a declaration of a rebellion.

“Even if Heaven and Hell are gone, even if God is gone, I’m not going to let this world end!”

She lifted her shovel, and watched the sun rising in the horizon. Seeing everything, she proudly declared.

She widened her green eyes towards the celestial bodies revolving in the skies.

“If this world has been forsaken by God, I shall take it all!”

The girl swore to retrieve the right to live and to die. There were only two listeners “You’re willing to help!?”

Ai’s teary face beamed towards them.

Yuri narrowed his eyes, asking,

“...This isn’t an attainable dream, you know? This isn’t as simple as flying in the sky or visiting the moon in the sky. You’re basically going to another universe here. Do you understand?”

Ai bluntly retorted,

“I don’t know!”

“...Hey wait...”

“I don’t know now...but.”

The green eyes remained widened.

“I want to understand...no matter whether I get there or not!”

“...I see. I got nothing to say then. I’ll lend you a hand.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Got nothing else to do anyway.”

Yuri reached out his rock-like hand. Ai held it elatedly.

“What about you, Miss Scar?”

“I...”

Scar looked extremely perturbed.

“I...cannot make a decision. What...is the matter with you? You are making me confused. This is not a function we should have ...”

“...So, no?”

“About that...I cannot be certain.”

Scar shook her head.

“So...I want to have a good look. At you.”

“Of me?”

“Yes. I want to look at the ideals you and your mother have. If I want to surpass my own functions as a gravekeeper...does this mean that I too am malfunctioning?”

Scar clearly looked unnerved, stroking her facial scar with her right hand.

But Ai gave the biggest affirmation to her words, “I think that’s right! I hope you can find your dreams too!”

This time, Ai reached her right hand forth. Scar held her hand tentatively.

Gathered here was a human, a gravekeeper and a child. They were holding hands.

“Now then, let’s find some place with people around.”

The human man rowed the boat.

“In that case, let’s get back onto the roads again.”

The gravekeeper girl read the direction of the wind.

“I want to go to places with lots of people! And places with lots of delicious food!”

Finally, the child took the lead.

Shoelaces,

Tied.

Backpack,

Carried.

Cap worn. Shovel raised.

So Ai strode forth.

For the sake of her great ambition.

Afterword

I always wanted to write about miracles.

I always wanted to write about some great, majestic fate that will continue towards the setting sun, a messy, happy ending like those in fairy tales, and something as unshakeable as the asphalt beneath the feet. I don't know if I did it well, but I started writing, and I finally wrote it.

I do hope however that you enjoy this.

Hello, this is Irie Kimihito

I wrote this story of a miracle with such thoughts, was blessed to win the grand prize of the 21st Fantasia awards and received a publication. The night I was informed of it, I felt the process was miraculous, and this notion left me laughing for a long, long while. I never thought my life would be more preposterous than this story I wrote.

I'm grateful for the congratulations, However, reality isn't that simple, and I spent the following days busy with stuff. I have to edit a bit here, not edit there, edit the parts that were edited. Half a year vanished in the blink of an eye, and I finally made it to this day.

This work has been assisted by many during this process. No, before this process.

Goes without saying, this includes the editor K, and the illustrator Shino. To the juries, my parents, ancestors, friends, the living, the dead, and to you reading this right now. I want to use this chance to express my sincere thanks to these people.

Thank you very much.

Maybe this graciousness might be too exuberant. So I think, “Is this...love?”

I love you.

Now then, I’m done with the confession. Next up is the news. There’s a short story I wrote for a column in Dragon Magazine (March 2010) on the day this book is released, and contains a story about Ai when she was two years younger. Also, apparently, I can be writing the second volume. I don’t know the details (I don’t know if the first volume is selling well), but I’ll be glad if this book is liked and supported by you.

Now then, we will probably meet again in the second volume.

Irie Kimihito